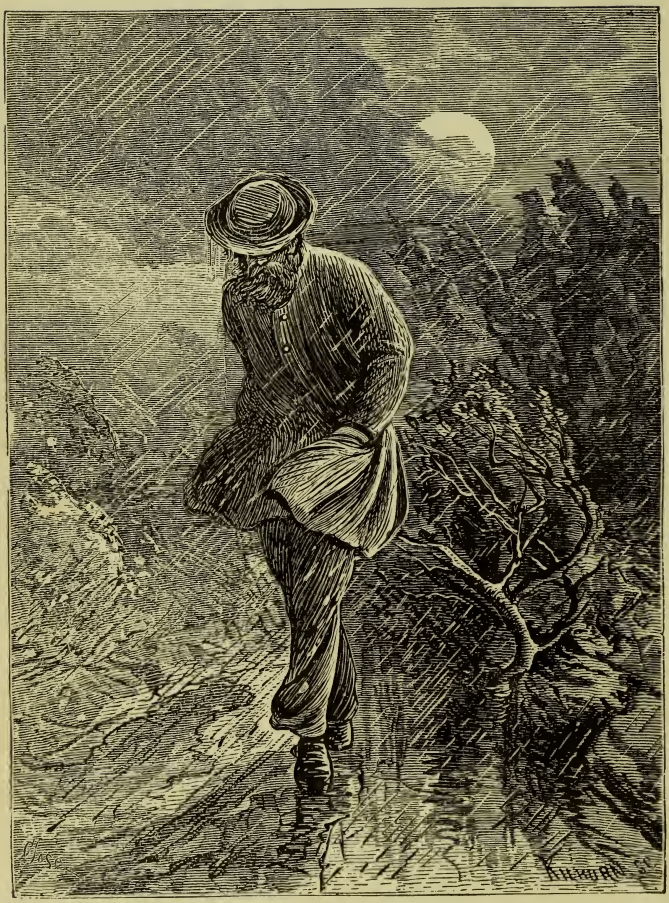
TRIED IN THE FIRE



"He went out into the night." page 193.

TRIED IN THE FIRE.

BY

LEONE BLANCHARD.

"That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."

PETER i. 7.

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TRIED IN THE FIRE,

A Story of the Life of Faith.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW HOME.

"UNCLE Percy, isn't this beautiful?"

Mr. West looked up from the book over which he had been dreaming in the still, October sunshine, and listened while the girlish voice that had wakened him from his reverie read a passage from one of Beecher's sermons.

"If men come to me and say, 'a man cannot love an intangible spirit,' my reply is 'He can,

for *I do*.' 'But' they say 'it is a mere fancy.' Fancy? Is fancy a thing so mighty as that? For I can bring you ten thousand men who have a faith in a present God which all the powers of earth and hell might strive in vain to remove. Tell me that it is an impossible thing to love the Lord Jesus Christ, who is invisible! You might as well, if I were to go forth now, beneath this glorious Sabbath sun, and its rays were to fall around me and about me on every side, tell me that there was no sun! Councils of owls and bats might come to me in the name of philosophers, and say, 'Do you not think that all these things you are talking about, rays of the sun, flowers, singing birds, and the like, are a delusion? We have lived almost as long as you have, and have consulted the oldest owls and bats, and we don't believe in them.' Let owls and bats take their experience from dens and caves, but let men take their knowledge from the heaven. I know, whatever men may say, in the low places, and in the high places of life, I

know there is such a thing as loving Jesus Christ as a friend, as a brother; and there is no other love that is so sweet, so deep, so lasting and so wondrous, as that which the soul can bear to him."

There was a glow on the fair young face of the reader, when she concluded, which showed that she was in full sympathy with the fervor of the eloquent preacher, but her uncle's countenance wore a quizzical look which puzzled and disconcerted her.

"Very enthusiastic," was his comment. "Do you believe he means all this?"

"Of course I do" replied the little lady with warmth. "Why should I doubt it?"

"Oh, you know people do sometimes say things for effect," was the cool reply.

"But he would not, I know," she persisted, adding after a little pause, "I see you look somewhat sceptical, but whatever you think of the motives underlying, you can surely help me appreciate the beautiful sentiment."

"Perhaps the subject-matter of this discourse is the very point on which we should differ most widely."

The girl looked bewildered and incredulous, and demanded half-pettishly, —

"What do you mean, Uncle Percy, by quizzing me so, this morning?"

"I am not quizzing you, child," he answered, "but I have said what I did not mean to say. That is a beautiful faith you enjoy, and I have no desire to unsettle it. There is the church-bell; go, and forget my quizzing, as you call it."

"But are not you and Aunt Mary going?"

"Not this morning, I think. The sunny window and this book are too pleasant to leave, and your aunt is not feeling very well. What say you, Mary?" appealing to his wife who had just entered the room. "You'll not presume to question the wisdom of my decision, will you?"

"Autocrat," she said, smiling at his playful assumption; then, more gravely, "I can go well enough; the day is so pleasant we hardly ought to stay at home."

He replied by drawing her to the sofa beside him and arranging the pillows so temptingly that she resigned herself to the luxury of indolence, and Florence went to church alone.

"What does he mean?" she asked herself, over and over, as she directed her steps to the spot where the village church-spire rose above the autumn-tinted trees and gleamed in soft, rich sunshine. She had never heard her uncle speak lightly of Christ or his religion before, and she could hardly believe he meant to do so now. She had been in his home only a few weeks, since her widowed mother died, bequeathing to her daughter as her richest legacy the Christian faith, and assigning her to the care of her only brother. Percy West received the charge gladly. He had loved and petted the little Florence in infancy, and almost envied his sister the possession of her treasure then, for his own home was desolate, because the destroying angel had been there to hush the silver laugh and the patter of little feet, which were once his sweetest

music. A daughter had been given to him since, but she too had gone, and he fondly hoped that Florence would help to fill the void in his heart and home. He was a grave, thoughtful man, and since sorrow had deepened the sombre elements of his character, he seemed, to those who knew him superficially, stern and severe. But there lay "under the ice" a wealth of tenderness and devotion of which not many dreamed, He was strong, energetic, determined almost to obstinacy, self-reliant to the verge of egotism, and he held his own opinions with a tenacity which savored of arrogance. A mind like this, is a dangerous strong-hold for infidelity, and if his sister had known how firmly these views were intrenched in his iron nature, she would have been loth to intrust her daughter to his care. But as he seldom spoke of them, she hoped that the skepticism of his early manhood was only a passing shadow, which the light of advancing years had dispelled.

His wife was a gentle, amiable woman, not

fully sharing her husbands views, but too much in awe of him to oppose them very strongly. A sister of Mr. West's who was teaching in the public schools of the village, completed the household, — a warm, generous, impulsive, high-spirited woman, a strange compound of strength and weakness, of self-reliance and dependence, of willfulness and compliance.

Into this family came Florence Alton, at the age of seventeen, with the deep shadow of a mother's death just fallen on her bright, young head, with the far-away memory of a father's hand among her sunny curls, and dim yearning dreams of a brother over the seas, whose business doomed him to a long exile from his native land. She was quiet and reserved by nature, and studious in her habits, yet with a warm, tender heart which craved companionship and sympathy. She found many congenial elements in her new home; Fanny West was sympathetic and winning, Aunt Mary's gentle restful manner soothed her, while for her uncle she entertained a fervent

admiration, and usually considered his opinions conclusive when she needed advice or directions. But there was one deeply felt want which oppressed her; the religious element, which exerted so strong an influence in her mother's little household, seemed entirely wanting here.

She hoped it was only a seeming, not a real want and waited anxiously for some indications that her hopes were not unfounded. She could find none, except that the family usually attended church once or twice on the Sabbath; but on the morning of which we began to write, she became so absorbed in her favorite sermons that she forgot her apprehensions, and, in her instinctive appeal to her uncle, fully expected his acquiescence and sympathy, and was disappointed and pained by his remarks. To her musing question, "What does he mean?" she could find no satisfactory answer, and shrinking from the one which seemed forcing itself upon her, she resolved to do as he had requested,—put the subject from her thoughts and forget the words he had spoken.

The sermon to which she listened that morning was in perfect keeping with the day, — gentle and tender as the hazy sunshine, rich as the many-tinted woods. "The family that Jesus loved" was the theme, and a beautiful picture was drawn of the little household at Bethany, when the Son of God was fain to find a quiet resting-place after the toils of the day were over. The full and rich and loving humanity of Jesus was glowingly portrayed, and at every pause Florence seemed to hear as a sweet refrain the words she had read that morning. "I know – whatever men may say, in the low places and in the high places of life — I know there is such a thing as loving Jesus Christ as a friend, as a brother; and there is no other love that is so sweet, so deep, so lasting and so wondrous as that which the soul can bear to him." Then the question came back with painful distinctness, "Can it be that Uncle Percy does not believe this love possible?"

She was thinking of it again as she reclined on

the sofa in the twilight of that golden day. Mr. West and his wife and sister were talking in subdued tones — the dreamy hush of the atmosphere seemed to cast a spell upon them all—and Florence scarcely heard them till Mrs. West roused her with a kiss, saying, "You are very quiet, this evening, my dear."

"The touch of this October air makes us all quiet, don't it, Aunty?" she said, "and I am never noted for my vivacity, you know."

"She will have enough to keep her awake tomorrow, if she enters school," said her uncle. "You haven't forgotten your passion for study, have you, Florence?"

"Not a bit of it, Uncle? I love my books better than anything else I believe!"

That's not very flattering to your friends Floy," said Miss West.

"Jealous as usual," said her brother teasingly. "Never mind, Florence, she'll be as proud of your laurels as any of us — or would be, if you were in her classes"

"I shall be," was the answer, "but I shan't allow her her to fossilize among her books, if I can manage to keep the world of sensation fresh about her."

"Let you alone for the sensational, Fanny;" said her brother, "but Florence has my full permission to be as studious as she pleases this winter."

"I fear I shall find the classes in advance of me, Uncle," said Florence, "you know I have not been in school for several months."

"I know it, but you will soon overtake them," returned her uncle encouragingly. "You will find some formidable competitors there too,—foemen worthy of your steel,—but I'm not afraid to match you with them."

If Mr. West aimed in this way, to remove any unpleasant impression left in the mind of his niece by the morning's conversation, he could not have chosen a surer method of leading her thoughts into a new channel. She was an ambitious student, and a very successful one, and

keenly enjoyed the triumphs she always won at school. Her eyes were sparkling now, at the brilliant prospect her uncle's words suggested, and she mentally resolved to merit his implied commendation and fulfill his flattering predictions.

"Now give us some music, Fanny," said Mrs. West, "and we'll send our little girl to bed and have her energies fully recuperated for her career of victory."

"What shall it be?" asked Fanny. Something to suit the dreamy evening and our quiet mood?"

"Something stirring, rather, to rouse us out of our dreams," said her brother.

"I fear I shall fail in the sensational to-night," she answered, as she seated herself at the piano, and began to play a lively air; but true to her prediction, her fingers soon wandered into minor keys and subdued melodies, and she closed with that exquisite pleading hymn of Bowring's, beginning,—

"From the recesses of a lowly spirit
Our humble prayer ascends ; O Father, hear it!
Borne on the trembling wings of awe and meekness,
Forgive its weakness."

She sang with evident feeling, and Florence s eyes were misty when she closed. "Surely Aunt Fanny knows what that love so sweet, so deep, so lasting, and so wondrous is," was her inward comment. She glanced up at her uncle, his face was shaded with his hand, and she could not see it; perhaps she could not have read it had she seen. 2

CHAPTER II.

FIRST DAYS AT SCHOOL.

"NOT slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord:" this was the verse for October fifth, in Florence's "Daily Food," and as she read it that morning before she went to school, she prayerfully resolved that that text should be her motto during the busy months to come. "Not slothful in business" — that would be easy, when "business" meant something she loved as she did her studies; "fervent in spirit" — she must give good heed to that injunction, lest her diligence become a marked absorption, her purpose a selfish ambition; "serving

the Lord" — how conld she serve him? How but by laying time and talents and acquirements all on his altar, asking heavenly wisdom to consecrate the earthly knowledge unto noble ends? She was musing thus, when she heard a quick tap at the door, and an imperative voice demanded, —

"Are you ready for school, Florence?"

"In one minute, Aunt Fanny," responded Florence, seizing her hat and gloves.

"In one minute I will join you, then," said Miss West, passing on to her room, whence she very soon re-appeared, and they left the house together.

"Oh these glorious days!" said Florence, "don't you love them, Aunt Fanny?"

"Indeed I do," was the answer. "September and October are worth all the rest of the year to me. The mere sense of existence is intense enjoyment in such an atmosphere as this — unless one happens to be out of tune with Nature from some cause."

"I hope that will never happen to me. I

would not lose the keen delight 'dear mother Nature' gives me, for the world. She is the only mother I have now," added Florence, with a sigh.

Aunt Fanny pressed the hand she held in hers, and they walked on in silence, till they neared the school-room, when Miss West asked,—

"Do you dread the initiation?"

"Not much," said her niece, "since I have you to introduce me; and you know I always feel at home in a school-room, anyway."

"You will like the Principal, I know. He is the same one we had last year, but the lady assistant is a new one. I don't know much about her. I met her in company once last week and liked her face exceedingly, though it expresses more fire than firmness, and more sweetness than dignity. You will love her, I am sure, but you will hardly reverence her as you will the grave professor."

They were entering the school-room now, and Miss Ames was approaching them, and as Flor-

ence glanced into the bright, magnetic eyes, she felt sure her aunt's prediction would not be long in fulfilling. Miss West presented her niece to Miss Ames, and to Prof. Stanley, then retired to the room below where she had charge of the primary department. The iron tongue of the bell soon silenced the hum of voices and dispersed the merry groups to their seats, when Florence found herself side by side with a girl who formed as complete a contrast to her as could well be imagined. Lively, quick, imperative, willful, her whole air and manner bespoke the petted, capricious, undisciplined child. At recess she greeted Florence cordially, and when the latter betrayed some surprise, she said,—

"Oh, I'm acquainted with you, if you don't know me. Miss West showed me your picture, and told me about you, last term, and lately I heard that you had come here to live. I'm so glad you are my seat-mate. We'll have plenty of fun together, won't we?"

"Not in school hours, I hope," said Florence, smiling.

"Well, no — yes — I don't mean to be very prim and proper at any time. I believe in enjoying myself in spite of rules and lynx-eyed teachers," was the rattling answer.

"Say, rather, we'll enjoy ourselves in conformity to rules and in obedience to teachers."

"I shall say no such thing! And I've no time to listen to a sermon either. Come, let me introduce you to some of the other girls."

"But you haven't introduced yourself yet," said Florence.

"Oh, I beg pardon, Miss Alton, allow me to present to you Miss Anna Eldridge," said her lively companion, with a suddenly-assumed, drawing-room air.

Florence expressed herself verv happy to make the acquaintance, and Anna began a running comment on the girls about them.

"There is one that will just suit you — that demure, little, dove-eyed darling yonder, Mary Williams. Sweet-tempered as any saint, conscientious and pious as a parson, wouldn't do any-

thing naughty for the world. I don't believe she will keep pace with you in your studies, though, much better than I shall. Miss Ford, over there, will be a more formidable rival. She is good, too, but more in the active, go-ahead style than Mary. She will undertake to revolutionize the school and make us all model scholars and good Christians besides. Well, she begins by setting us a good example, I can't deny that. Evy Mortimer, who stands at her right, is a little ——" but just here the bell put a stop to the lively monologue and sent the girls to their seats. Florence, inly wondering whether it was a mere chance which had placed her in contact with this effervescent spirit, or whether it was a piece of magisterial strategy, designed to keep the explosive qualities in check. What should she do? Encourage the intimacy which circumstances seemed to favor, and her companion nothing loth to foster? What would be the result? Should she take Anna in hand and tame her, or receive into her own nature a part of her reckless

and willfulness, or would they remain in contact, like oil and water, without any transformation?

She was asking Miss West some of these questions at home that evening, and the answer was, "I think you and Anna will do each other good. She is a little rattle-brained, it is true, but you are too reserved. Besides there is more in her, than you imagine. Study her a little, when you can spare time from your Latin and Algebra, and let me know the result by and by."

Florence had a good opportunity for the study next morning, for, as she entered the school room, Anna stood talking with a group of girls apart from the rest, and Florence, unnoticed by her, took her seat and sat noting the outlines of her face and the play of her features with much interest. The face was not very handsome, certainly, not regular or faultless in its contour, but there was a fascination about it not easily resisted, especially when its owner chose to make it effective. The dark blue eyes were large,

deeply fringed and varied in expression, sometimes soft and tender, often full of merry roguery, again cold and piercing, and keen as steel. The mouth was very willful in its downward curve, the forehead low and broad, shaded by a mass of waving brown hair. Florence was trying to decide whether the face more attracted or repelled her, when Anna seemed to become aware of the scrutiny and turned toward her with a laughing, menacing gesture. She returned a look of merry defiance and then turned to speak to Mary Williams, who, with her quiet smile and gentle voice had just come to bid her good morning. Florence was going to join her again at recess, but was detained by one of Anna's lively sallies, and then Miss Ames came to point out a little mistake in her French exercise, and to commend its general execution.

"You are fond of the languages, are you not?" she asked.

"Yes, they are my favorite study," said Florence. "I wish I liked mathemathics as

well. Here is a problem that puzzles me terribly this morning."

Miss Ames looked at the knotty problem, and. by a few adroit questions helped Florence to a solution, then said, "You are doing well in Algebra, whether you like it or not. I think your taste for it will develop itself. If I didn't I should hardly encourage your fondness for the languages, lest they monopolize your attention. But, as it is, would you like to come to my room and read with me occasionally?"

"Oh, above all things! But it would be asking too much of you."

"Suppose I do the asking," she said with her bright, peculiar smile. "There are two or three French authors I want to re-read this fall, and I think you are fully prepared to undertake them, though the other members of the class are not. Come to my room after school this evening and we will see about it. Miss Ford will be there too."

Florence was delighted to accept the invita-

tion, and the trio in Miss Ames's room that evening selected their text-books and arranged a semi-weekly meeting at that time and place; then they fell into a quiet chat in which Miss Ames's pleasant familiarity made them forget she was not a school-girl with them. She showed them her books and pictures and a pretty cabinet of shells, talked of literature, and art and music and all beautiful things, till the setting sun warned them of the passing hours and compelled them to break the spell of enchantment.

"Oh, isn't she lovely?" exclaimed Florence, as soon as she found herself on the sidewalk with Miss Ford. "How we shall enjoy these readings!"

"Yes, and our recitations at school too. I am glad we happen to be in so many of her classes."

"So am I, but I like Mr. Stanly very much in Latin."

"He is splendid," said Miss Ford, "but most of the girls are mortally afraid of him. How frightened poor, little Miss Mortimer was this

morning when she found what a ludicrous blunder she had made. But Mr. Stanly looked at her in such a compassionate, fatherly way, and concealed his amusement so well, he must have won her everlasting gratitude if she had observed the expression."

"Yes and how soon a word and a gesture from him checked the amusement of the class. I wonder if any one ever thought of disobeying him after looking into those gray eyes of his."

"I fancy no one cares to do it more than once, —unless it be Anna Eldrege. She seems to have the upper hand of him, or he has some plan in reference to her that we don't understand. I shouldn't wonder if he might bring her to a sense of the error of her doings in some sudden and novel manner, one of these days. She annoyed him more or less all last term."

The girls soon parted at Mr. West's gate, Miss Ford agreeing to call for Florence in the morning. The latter passed leisurely up the shaded garden-walk, pausing to gather a handful of

scarlet maple leaves, and enjoy the rich glow which sunset had left in the hazy west. Entering the house she found the family at tea, and was called to account for her truancy with playful severity by her aunt.

"Indeed, Aunt Mary, I didn't know I was playing truant so badly," she apologized. "Miss Ames wanted to see me at her room, and, once there, I never thought of the time. Miss Ames is going to let Ellen Ford and me read French with her — isn't she good?"

"It would never do to dispute that point with you, I suppose," was the answer. "But look on the mantel, and you will find a letter from your brother. I ought not to have told you, though, till after supper," she added, as Florence, with a joyful exclamation, seized the letter, and was soon lost in its contents. It was written in a bold, dashing, manly hand, and gave bright pictures of Paris life, cheering accounts of success in business, with pleasant anticipations of the time when he should return and take care of his

"little sister" himself. She handed the letter to her uncle for him to read, and when he had finished it, he remarked, —

"Charles is quite enchanted with Paris life, I see. Don't you wish you were with him?"

"I could hardly leave my school and my friends here," she said, "but oh, how glad I shall be when Charley comes home."

Florence wondered why her uncle looked so grave. Perhaps he had more than one reason for not sharing her bright anticipations, but he only said, —

"I fear I am a little selfish in the matter. I hardly want him to come home if he is going to take you away from me."

She went to his side and kissed him, and that night prayed more earnestly than ever for the dear uncle she so loved and honored, and for the brother so far away, whom her youthful fancy pictured as the embodiment of everything noble and beautiful and good.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRAYER-MEETING.

ELLEN Ford called for Florence, the next morning, as she had promised, and after school they walked home together. Passing the church on the way, they saw the sexton there, making fires, and remembered that it was the evening for the weekly prayer-meeting.

"Do you attend?" asked Miss Ford.

"Not often," answered Florence. "Uncle and aunt seldom go, so I haven't a very good opportunity."

"I've been thinking, by the way, why couldn't we girls have a meeting of our own, at the school-room or at each other's homes — a social meeting, not stereotyped and formal, but something we shall love to attend, and that will aid us in making the spiritual life keep pace with the intellectual."

"I wish we might; let's speak to Miss Ames about it, the next time we go there to read."

"Well, agreed!" And after the reading was over they broached the subject, when their teacher answered, —

"It is an excellent plan; I am glad you suggested it. But suppose you come here to my room, instead of remaining at the school-house."

"Oh, that will be delightful! Then you will always be with us, and will take the lead of the meetings, won't you?"

"I don't know about leading always, but I would like to make a suggestion as to the manner of conducting them."

"That is just what we want."

"It is simply this: at every meeting have some special topic chosen, and let the hymns and prayers and conversation all bear on that. Let the subject be selected the previous week, and each one think of it and have some idea to advance concerning it, if it is nothing more than a quotation. I think this will give the meetings a point and interest that can hardly be secured by the usual method of trusting to the impulse of the moment."

"The girls both expressed themselves delighted with this arrangement, and Ellen asked, "What shall be our first subject?"

"Suppose we discuss the practical question, How can we best exert a Christian influence in the school? Tell the girls we want to meet and talk over that subject, instead of giving them a formal invitation to attend a prayer-meeting."

"We will do so, and thank you very much for your invitation and suggestions."

The ensuing Thursday evening found a little company of some dozen girls assembled at Miss

Ames's room. She greeted them cordially and talked a while on indifferent subjects, then remarked, —

"We must not forget the object of our coming together this evening. Let us sing that simple Sabbath School hymn, —

'Brother you can work for Jesus,'

and then ask for divine direction while we consider *how* we can work for him."

The hymn was sung with feeling, and two or three short, fervent prayers were offered for wisdom to guide them in their inquiry, and grace to follow out its results; then Miss Ames read a part of the fourth chapter of John, with some simple comments on the way Jesus took to reach the heart of the Samaritan woman, closing her selection with those thrilling words, —

"Say not ye, there are yet four months and then cometh harvest! Behold, I say unto you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, for they are white already to harvest. And he that

reapeth, receiveth wages and gathereth fruit unto life eternal, that both he that serveth and he that reapeth may rejoice together."

Closing, the book she asked the girls, "What do you suppose struck the Samaritan woman most forcibly in this interview with Jesus?"

"I think it was his kind and gentle manner, so different from that of all other Jews," said Mary Williams, and Ellen Ford added, —

"Yes, though the evidence by which she convinced others was, 'He told me all things that ever I did,' I think the heavenly spirit he showed was, to her, the strongest proof of his Messiahship. Some one has beautifully expressed it in this way; 'Having no hatred of her nation, for he asked drink of her, and talked with her kindly; no prejudice against Mount Gerizim, for he said the Jerusalem worship, too, must pass away; no denunciation for her evil ways, but a tender solicitude to lead her to a purer life, he was surely no ordinary Jew, — who could he be but the Christ, the Son of God!'"

Miss Ames saw a question in the eye of one who sat near her, and said, "What is it, Lucy?"

"I was thinking" she answered, "that if we had to deal with heathen or outcasts, this lesson would be of infinite value to us; but its application to our intercourse with friends and associates I do not see so clearly."

"There are a great many good persons," said Miss Ames, "that are too prone to deal with every one whom they wish to influence to a better life, as if he were a great criminal in comparison with themselves. They hurl the epithets 'sinner' and 'infidel' about them with positive maliciousness sometimes, forgetting that they themselves have often sinned, and even had need to pray, 'Lord help our unbelief.' In direct opposition to this, stands the beautiful example of Christ. There was no 'stand aside, I am holier than thou' with him, who, sinless as he was, might justly have said it; much less, should there be a shadow of this feeling with us. We must never upbraid or denounce those whom we

wish to win; but, going to them in love and in the spirit of meekness, make them feel that we know their needs by our own, and only wish to lead them where those wants can be supplied."

A moment's pause, and they sang softly,—

"How beauteous were the marks divine
That in thy meekness used to shine,
That lit thy lonely pathway, trod
In wondrous love, O Son of God!

"Oh in thy light be mine to go,
Illuming all my way of woe;
And give me ever on the road
To trace thy footsteps, Son of God!"

"Another thing that strikes me in this interview, as in all the teachings of Jesus," said Miss Ames, "is the illustration of spiritual, by material things,— the seizing hold of the trivial incidents of daily life to make them glow with divine meaning. I believe the author from whom Miss Ford quoted, makes the suggestion, touching as it is simple, that the Samaritan woman never would go again to that well, without thinking of

the words of Jesus, 'Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again, but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up unto everlasting life.'"

"It requires skill to make the transition from earthly to heavenly things without abruptness, doesn't it?" asked one; and Miss Ames answered, —

"Yes, it will not do to force a spiritual significance upon everything, at all times and places; that would only disgust and repel. But we can often lead the minds of those about us gently and imperceptibly toward heaven, if our own dwell there. A walk in the forest may suggest 'God's first temples,' and thence his later ones; a glowing sunset may remind us of that city which 'hath no need of the sun;' an exhibition of parental tenderness may be made the occasion of calling to mind our Heavenly Father's love. But it is impossible to give rules for this kind of

work. The great thing is, to keep our minds in harmony with God, making it our meat and drink to do his will, then we can hardly fail to find opportunities of making our influence felt in the right direction."

After spending a few minutes more in pleasant converse, chiefly on the rewards of Christian labor, the "gathering fruit unto life eternal," they sang and prayed again, and then, appointing a leader and selecting a topic for the next meeting, they separated with the feeling that such a prayer-meeting as this was a very pleasant affair, and that its blessed influences would go with them, to make them more earnest and efficient in their Master's work.

It was not long after this that Florence returning from school, found Mr. Richards, the minister whose church she had been in the habit of attending, chatting pleasantly with the family in the parlor. When presented to him, she was greeted warmly and courteously, with the remark, —

"Your niece is hardly a stranger, as I have seen her at church so often with you, — and, by the way, I believe I have seen her there alone once or twice of late," — glancing with a smile of half-playful reproof at Mr. and Mrs. West. "She will make her home with us in Mayville now, will she not?"

"Yes," said her uncle. "I claim her now, and mean to keep her as long as I can."

"I am very happy, Miss Alton, to welcome you to the village, and to our church services especially," said Mr. Richards earnestly. "Have you found a place in the Sabbath School, or did you put that away with other childish things, on assuming young ladyhood?"

"Oh no, sir! I always attended Sabbath School at home — my old home, —" she said softly, — "but here everything was new and strange, and —"

"No one invited you to a class, I suppose; but that shall not be the case any longer. I will see that you have a place either as teacher or pupil

next Sabbath,— unless your uncle prefers to take you under his own tuition,—" turning to Mr. West

"No, I give her over to you. She belongs to your church instead of mine, I believe, and I shall not attempt to proselyte. But I advise you to look after her pretty well, for I fear you will find her situated something like a lamb among wolves, here."

Mr. Richards keenly felt the sad truth concealed under this jesting remark, but he only said with a serious smile, "I accept the charge willingly, yet I cannot give up the hope that you will soon be prepared to help me fulfill the trust." Then, turning to Florence, he asked, "You are a member of the church, then, are you?"

"Not of the visible church," she said, glancing timidly at her uncle; "but I should like to become one."

She fancied his lips were compressed a little more sternly than usual, but marked no other sign of displeasure.

"You have a hope in the Savior, then," said the pastor. "I am rejoiced to hear it, and we shall all be glad to receive you into church-membership. I will see you again soon, in reference to this matter."

After a few minutes spent in general conversation, he withdrew, and when he was gone, Florence said to her uncle, "I wish you would tell me wherein your religion differs from mine, or from Mr. Richards's."

"It would take me a long time to tell you fully," he answered; "and I am not sure you would quite understand me, or be at all benefitted if you did."

"Why should I not be benefitted?"

"You are happy in your present faith, are you not?"

"Yes, but if yours is good for you, why isn't it for me?"

"Curious as mother Eve," he said, with the old, teasing look. "You may have to pay her penalty yet, and be exiled from your Eden.

Don't call me your serpent, when that happens."

"I shall never call you anything but my own dear uncle,—unless you tease me out of all patience," she added seriously.

"Well, then, I will try to satisfy your curiosity, on one condition, which is, that you will tell me why you believe as you do."

"Why? Because the Bible teaches me so, if I understand it."

"But why do you believe the Bible?"

"Surely, Uncle Percy, you do not mean to question its authority?" she said, sorrowfully.

"You are not answering my question," was the cool reply.

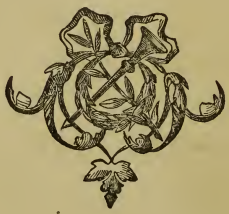
"I believe it because it is the word of God, who cannot lie."

"How do you know it is the the word of God?"

"It is so pure and beautiful and lofty, so like God, and so adapted to the wants of the souls he has made, how can it but be from him?" she answered, earnestly.

"But suppose it does not seem Godlike to me — suppose it does not meet my wants?"

She felt the keen eyes fixed upon her, and knew he was waiting for her answer, but she could not frame one. She felt stunned and bewildered. She was not accustomed to such questions, and though her whole soul rose up against them, she had not the logic to reply. Mr. West saw her confusion, and did not press the matter, but taking up a book, left her to her thoughts, which were somewhat confused.



CHAPTER IV.

THE GOOD WORK PROSPERS.

THE next day, Florence repeated to Ellen Ford the substance of the conversation which had passed between herself and her uncle, and asked her how she should have answered his last question.

"I don't know," said Ellen. "I think, in the first place, I should let him enjoy his opinions in silence, and be glad to escape the ordeal of hearing them advocated."

"Ellen, is Christianity so weak a thing that it cannot stand a breath of suspicion, or a word of questioning?" said Florence, warmly.

"Certainly not," was the quiet answer, "else it would have been dead long ago, and we should now be spared the trouble of investigating its claims. But the question is, are you and I competent to conduct the investigation with a logical accuracy, and a critical keenness, which shall lead to satisfactory results?"

"If not, are we competent to believe in Christianity, and rest our hope of heaven upon it?"

"Florence, if you were sick and needed a doctor, would you stop to investigate and weigh all the scientific claims of all the "pathies," before you decided whom to employ?"

Florence rather thought not; and decided that, as the Great Physician was doing very well for her soul, and had done for the souls of multitudes, she would trust herself still in his hands and not question his mode of treatment. But the thought that her highly honored uncle did not then trust him, troubled her, and she kept wondering why it was, and how he could be induced to change his views. For change them he must,

she thought. He was so good and noble, she reverenced him so much, how could she bear to think of him as standing in enmity to God, and disbelieving the record which he gave of his Son. She wondered if Mr. Richard would not convince him of his error, and what arguments he would use, what influences bring to bear upon him for this purpose. Then the old question came back. What are the "Evidences of Christianity?" She wished she knew more about them. There must be proofs which would appeal to the intellect as well as to the heart. She would ask Miss Ames about it. She did so at the earliest opportunity, and received this reply: —

"Certainly; there are 'Evidences of Christianity.' That used to be one of our studies at school, but I don't know that it did much good. It was distasteful to most of the class, and the labors, dangers and sufferings of Paley's heroes awakened less real interest than did the exploits of Alexander and Cæsar. I do not think our faith was strengthened, or our views of religion exalted very greatly by the study."

Florence could not help thinking it would be different with her, but she had so much confidence in Miss Ames's opinion she could hardly demur at any of them. Her teacher saw that she was not quite satisfied, and continued, passing an arm caressingly about her, —

"You are not ready for, 'Evidences' yet, anyway. You have other studies to finish first. Don't trouble your young head with anything so abstruse now, but go and see how many of the girls you can bring with you to the prayer-meeting to-night."

This served to divert her thoughts, and was perhaps the best advice which could have been given her just then. Several who had not yet attended the meeting, promised to go that afternoon. She was on the point of asking Anna, but the girl seemed even more than usually possessed by the spirit of mischief that day, and determined that neither she, nor any one about her should think soberly of anything, even of their studies in school hours; so that Florence hardly felt like broach

ing the subject of the meeting. After school, Anna came up to Florence, and linking her arm with her friend's, proposed a walk.

"Very well, if you will go where I am going," said Florence.

"And where may that be?"

"To the meeting at Miss Ames's room."

"Oh, yes, that wonderful prayer-meeting. I've heard something about it. Quite a unique specimen, isn't it? Why haven't you asked me to go, before?"

"Perhaps because I thought you would be more likely to go if I did not ask you," said Florence with a quiet smile.

"Your penetration does you credit," said Anna, merrily. "To show that I appreciate the compliment paid to my willfuluess, I will go this very evening, though I know you don't want me to."

This last assertion was partly true, for Florence dreaded her companion's merry raillery, but she tried to be glad, and succeeded pretty well. The

topic, that evening, was The Accepted Time, and the exercises consisted chiefly of Scripture quotations, such as "*Now* is the accepted time," "They that seek me early shall find me." They sang some simple but expressive hymns, like that sweet little call "Come to Jesus just now," which always has such a freshness about it, because new verses can be improvised at pleasure, — and the tender invitation,

> "To-day the Savior calls,
> O, hear him now!"

Anna, always impulsive, gave herself up to the influence of the hour, feeling more subdued and softened than Florence had ever seen her before. As they walked towards home she said, —

"I wish I was not such a good-for-nothing rattle-brain! Why can't I be quiet and sensible and good like you, I wonder?"

"Don't say like me," answered Florence; "but there is one beautiful example I wish we all

might copy, one heavenly Teacher who will aid us in fulfilling all good and noble aspirations."

Anna was silent and thoughtful, and when she parted from her companion, said, "Pray for me to-night;" a request to which Florence responded heartily. The next morning, when they met at school, it was with a fervent pressure of the hand which spoke more than words; and Florence saw, from her seatmate's face and manner, that the impressions of the previous day were not forgotten. Her teachers observed, during this, and the days which followed, an application to her studies, and a disposition to avoid giving them annoyance, at which they were both surprised and pleased.

At the next prayer-meeting, Anna, with several others, spoke of a newly-formed life-purpose, — of a peace and quiet happiness unknown before. The meetings became more and more interesting, and their numbers steadily increased, till Miss Ames's room was filled to overflowing. The gentlemen of the school had, in the meantime,

begun to hold similar meetings in one of the recitation rooms, and with like results; so it was decided to unite the two, and, opening one of the churches for their accommodation, give a general invitation to all the young people of the village. Many came who had never been accustomed to frequent the house of prayer, and a powerful influence for good went out from those weekly gatherings of young, earnest souls. As their interest and enthusiasm increased, the formality of confining themselves to special topics was partly dropped, though a theme was usually chosen as the key-note of the meeting, and to form the subject of conversation, till overborne by the thoughts and emotions of the hour.

Mr. Richards hailed this movement with the joy which only he who has long been going forth with weeping, bearing precious seed, can feel, when he sees the golden harvest waving round him. He was the oldest resident minister of the place, and, during all the years of his pastorate, the tenderest yearnings of his heart had been

for the young. He longed to see those hearts, on which the dew and freshness of the morning lingered, laid, a willing sacrifice, on the altar of the Lord. He had a happy faculty of winning their confidence and love; they all felt that he was their truest friend, and a few had obeyed his loving admonition to remember their Creator in the days of their youth; but there had been no general awakening among them until now. The pastor strove, by every means, in the pulpit and out of it, to deepen the impression he was so glad to witness. He would occasionally drop into their meetings, very unobtrusively, lest his presence might embarrass the young participants; but they soon convinced him that their love for their pastor was of that perfect kind which "casteth out fear," and he yielded to their urgent invitations to meet with them constantly; and sometimes, though not often, he conducted the exercises himself.

He began, also, to hold public services in the evening, two or three times a week, and soon

had the satisfaction of seeing the religious interest extend to all classes of the community, and strong men bowing to the claims of the Divine Redeemer. On one of these occasions, when Mr. West was present, several prominent citizens gave earnest testimony to the real and priceless worth of the Christian religion,— among them a lawyer, who had long been known as an inveterate sceptic. At the close of the service, Mr. Richards came down the aisle, and, taking Mr. West's hand, said earnestly, "You have heard the testimony of your brother lawyer, and of other men, whose word you never thought of doubting, and whose judgment you consider reliable in other matters. May I not hope you will yet be induced to reconsider your present views?"

"I thank you for your friendly interest," he answered; "but I considered these views pretty thoroughly before adopting them, and fear any further investigation will only be a waste of time."

Mr. West went home, and played cards with his wife and sister till near midnight, and the next evening, took them to a ball! "A strange economy of time," thought Florence; and, as the first doubt of her uncle's sincerity crossed her mind, she bowed her head and wept bitterly. But there were her books before her, and a long, quiet evening to spend alone with them. She soon became so absorbed in her pleasant tasks as to forget everything else, and took no note of the passing hours, till the return of the family aroused her.

"What, studying yet, you book-worm?" said Aunt Fanny.

"Why, what time is it?" asked Florence. "You are home early, aren't you?"

"Florence Alton, are you in the body, or out of it?" returned her aunt, in no very gentle tone. "Look up at the clock!"

She did so, and found, to her astonishment, that the "wee, sma' hours" were well advanced. "Is it possible?" she exclaimed. "Next time

you go away and leave me to study, you must set the alarm at half past ten."

"You need a shaking!" said Fanny, with an energy which Florence feared was not all playfulness.

Mr. West came to the rescue, and said, in the tone of quiet raillery with which he often met his sister's impetuosity, "Take care, Fanny; don't lose your temper because Florence is so much more studious than you ever were."

She was thoroughly irritated now, and her "mind your business, Percy," was more emphatic than dignified. He did not notice it, however, and, as Fanny went to a seat by the fire, he came and looked over his niece's shoulder.

"What is it Florence? Are your lessons so hard, or so long, or so interesting, or what is the matter that they keep you up so late?"

"Oh, nothing, only I became so interested in Cæsar's battle with the Nervii that I could not leave it, but read on beyond the limits of the lesson."

"Well then, you will have so much less to do the rest of the week. But I advise you not to sit up quite so late again. I shall have to recall my permission to be as studious as you please, if you abuse it in this way."

She put away her books, and drew a chair up beside her aunt's, when the latter said with an impatient gesture, "Take care, you're on my dress. I do wish you'd keep your wits about you." But the moment after, she took Florence's hand and said penitently, "Don't mind what I say, to-night; I'm tired and cross." A few minutes later they went up stairs arm in arm and parted at the door of Florence's room with a kiss and a caress.

CHAPTER V.

TAKING NEW VOWS.

ON the first Sabbath of the New Year, Florence with some twenty other young persons, and a few older ones, stood in the sanctuary to take the vows of God upon them. Mr. Richards, having preached a sermon full of tender, solemn suggestions from the text, "Thou hast this day avouched the Lord to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes and his commandments and his judgments, and to hearken unto his

voice," descended from the pulpit to receive this avowal from lips which had never uttered it before. The ceremony of reception into the church was brief and simple and when it was over, the old and the new disciples gathered together around the table spread for that "silent festival" in which the invisible but present Lord seems so near his loving followers.

The service ended, Florence with a deep and quiet happiness pervading her being, and a sense of solemn obligation resting upon, but not oppressing her, was walking homeward beside Aunt Fanny, when the latter said with something like a sneer, —

"How much better are you, Florence, for the performances to-day?"

An expression of surprise and pain crossed Florence's countenance; but she was getting used to such things, and having ceased to look for any sympathy in her religious life, was beginning to stand on the defensive in regard to it; so she answered calmly, "A great deal

happier and stronger, certainly — I trust a little better."

"I think," continued Miss West, following out her own train of thought rather than noticing Florence's answer, — "I think the simple matter of doing right is very much mystified and complicated by church rites and creeds."

"Is 'doing right' such a simple thing, Aunt Fanny?" returned her companion with a quickness and earnestness which took her somewhat by surprise. "Have you forgotten how the old philosophers puzzled themselves over it, how even Plato could no more give an absolute definition of Right and Wrong than we can of the relative terms up and down? How many thousands of conflicting theories and practices have been considered right by different people and in various ages of the world? Coming down to our own experience, how often are we perplexed to know which of two paths is the right one, and even when we have decided theoretically, how much resolution and care and watchful-

ness are necessary to keep us where we ought to be. I tell you, Aunt Fanny, living in a world where 'every footfall touches a chord that shall vibrate to eternity' makes this matter of doing right, which you call so simple, the most complicate, incomprehensible thing in the universe. It makes me tremble when I think what responsibilities are placed upon such weak, erring creatures."

"That is only your morbid conscientiousness and youthful enthusiasm, my dear. When you have grown a little older and more practical, you will find that a reasonable amount of common-sense and self-control will enable you to live rightly enough."

"I hope I shall never live long enough to lower my standard of right!" said Florence warmly. "But even granting all you say, supposing it is a simple, easy thing to do right if we wish, how few choose that course, or set up any standard of right but their own selfish inclinations. Ah, Aunt Fanny, if people would only *do* that simple,

easy thing, there would be no need of church or preacher, no need of Christ's mission to the world, of the agony and death we had in memory to-day."

"And what need of the latter, as things are," said Miss West impatiently. "Is God so implacable that he cannot forgive the penitent without a sacrifice of blood?"

"Are you sure any would ever have become penitent without Christ's mission and sacrifice? And, in any case, can the administration of public justice be modified by the penitence of the offender? Can a magistrate forgive a condemned criminal merely because he confesses his crime and promises amendment? Can you, as a teacher, always waive a threatened punishment on that plea? Must not even a loving parent sometimes vindicate his authority at the expense of his tenderest emotions?"

"But, Florence, how does the death of Christ remove these difficulties?"

Ah! Aunt Fanny, we're approaching a mystery

now that 'the angels desire to look into,' and I suppose we must wait for the light of eternity to understand it fully. But I think I can see in some measure how it is, even now. God shows by this sacrifice, that he does not think lightly of sin though he pardons the offender, while, at the same time, the infinite love he thus displays, calls out our love in return and gives us the highest possible motive to sin no more. And if Christ is one with God, if the Law-giver takes the penalty upon himself, surely there is no injustice done."

There was a pause, and Florence added, "I have read a little story somewhere, which, without designing to illustrate this point, does so, about as well as anything I ever met with. A teacher, in a school where there were several young ladies, was very much annoyed by whispering, and threatened to 'ferule' the next one who should be guilty of that offense. The most defiant, willful one among the girls soon laid herself liable to the punishment, and though the

teacher was very loth to administer it, he felt that it must be done, and called the offender to him for that purpose. But he held her hand in such a way that the whole force of the blow fell upon his own, thus, at the same time, vindicating his authority before the school, and completely melting and subduing his wayward pupil. It seems to me there is some analogy in this to God's method of dealing with us."

"There may be some reason in this view of the matter," said Fanny, musingly. "But, after all, there is a great deal of mystery about it. I want a more plain, straight-forward way of coming to my Father, than through this atonement and mediation."

"We have only ourselves to blame for the obstacles, I think — ourselves and father Adam. When sin was first introduced into the universe, it must have been a strange and terrible disturbing force in the harmonious creation of God. No wonder it resulted in some strange complications. Disobedience to God's laws! I have sometimes

tried to imagine the consternation that must have seized celestial minds upon hearing such a thing announced as possible, nay, even actually committed! Who could such daring rebels be? How must God crush them in an instant by his almighty power! And when the problem was proposed, to redeem and save the guilty ones and yet maintain the honor of his throne, who but God could solve it? For my part I am too glad it has been solved, and pardon and peace made possible, to cavil at the methods employed."

"What a brusque little theologian you are, Florence! I did not know there was so much 'fight' in you. I must burnish my weapons before I encounter you again."

Florence was pained by this light dismissal of so grave a subject, but answered smilingly, in the words of another youthful combatant: — "Thou comest unto me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel."

At dinner that day, Fanny made some playful remark about what she called Florence's "polemical abilities," which drew from her brother the queries, "That's a new developement of her genius, isn't it? When did it begin to display itself?"

"Only this morning," said Fanny; and began to detail the conversation which had just passed between them. Florence's cheek flushed painfully, and her aunt, pitying her embarrassment, paused in the recital; but not till Mr. West's eyes were bent on his ward with an expression in which amusement and pride and fondness were all blended.

"Well done, Florence!" he exclaimed, in about the same tone he would adopt toward a little prattler who had just spelled "cat" for the first time. "Well done! You handled the subject almost as well as Mr. Richards himself. I wish you would give your reprobate old uncle the benefit of some of these dissertations."

"Uncle Percy, that is too bad!" said Florence,

almost ready to cry; but he eyed her with a comical expression, which made her laugh instead; then, suddenly resuming his gravity, he said, "I am more in earnest than you suppose. I would like to read the Bible through with you, and discuss it as we go along, by way of answering your questions about my belief — or unbelief, I suppose you would call it."

"I shall be glad to read with you," she said; but I am not at all competent to discuss these subjects. May we not read Scott's notes in connection with the Bible? Mother always wanted me to read that, or some other commentary; but the great, ancient-looking volumes always seemed too formidable. I should like, though, to undertake the task now with you, or at least, have the notes at hand to refer to, when we meet with difficulties."

"Aha! that's your plan for my discomfiture, is it? Two upon one is hardly fair. However, we will try it, — only, perhaps, I shall have occasion to refer to my authorities, now and then."

"All right! When shall we begin? This afternoon?"

"Your *now* is as omnipresent as Miss Ophelia's 'was,' isn't it? Your aunt and I are going out for a walk, soon. We will see how much time there is left afterwards."

Florence went to her room to seek light and wisdom from above; and, confidently hoping that the study they were about to undertake would prove beneficial to them both, she awaited her uncle's return.

When the walk was finished, the light of the short winter afternoon was waning, and Mr. West chose to lounge on the sofa by the fire till tea was brought in, and after that he had letters to write; so the study of the Bible was not commenced that day.

CHAPTER VI.

PREPARING FOR THE CONFLICT.

"WELL, Florence, how does the new term of school open?" said Mr. West, the following evening at tea.

"Very pleasantly," was the answer. "Vacation has given me a fresh appetite for study; and then I am so glad to see Miss Ames and the girls again."

"Do you continue your French readings with Miss Ames?" asked Aunt Fanny.

"No; there is a class formed now which we can enter, that will take the place of the private

readings. I'm sorry. I shall miss those delightful evenings in Miss Ames's room, and she is kind enough to say she shall miss them, too."

"She's as angelic as ever in your eyes, I suppose."

"Yes, every whit. Her smile, as she greeted us all this morning, had sunshine enough in it for a summer."

"And I suppose she made each one feel herself the especial favorite, the one of all others she was most glad to meet."

Florence was conscious that such an impression was latent in her own mind, at least, and a momentary suspicion flashed across her, but she repelled it as unworthy, and answered, with a pretty show of indignation, "There was no insincerity in it, I am sure! I believe you would have me doubt everything, Aunt Fanny!"

"You certainly will doubt a great many things that you believe now, before you are many years older, my dear little innocence."

"Then do let her believe them, while she can," said Mr. West. "Don't hasten the inevitable."

"I'm not hastening it; only preparing her for it," said Fanny, while Florence asked, earnestly,—

"Is it inevitable, Uncle Percy? Must I lose this sweet, unquestioning faith, and learn to be all doubt and suspicion? I'd rather die!"

"Yes, it's easier to die than to learn some of the lessons life teaches," said Mr. West, sadly; "but they must be learned, for all that. About this matter of believing in people and things, there is a golden mean here, as in everything else. We must not be too credulous, neither should we allow ourselves to become faithless and cynical. There is much that is grand and beautiful in life, much of loveliness and nobleness in human character; but there are, also, many counterfeits, and we must learn to distinguish between the false and the true."

"But to be always on my guard, always watching and testing and analyzing, afraid to love anything that seems lovely, lest it should be evil in disguise,—I never could live that way!"

"You put the case too strongly. You know I did not advise either extreme. We were talking about the school, weren't we, when we flew off on this tangent? Are there many new pupils in, this term?"

"Yes, quite a number; and some of the old ones have gone,—Anna Eldridge among the latter."

"You can study quite as well without her, can't you?" said Fanny.

Florence smiled. "A few weeks ago, I should have answered yes, very decidedly; but, really, I miss her more than I should have thought possible. You know she was much more quiet and sensible toward the close of the term."

"Perhaps it was well she left while her character was good," remarked Mrs. West.

"What, are you growing cynical?" said Fanny. "Take care how you encroach on my peculiar province."

"I am very sorry, at least, for the occasion which called her home," continued Florence.

"Her father is very sick, they tell me — Uncle, where does Mr. Eldridge live?"

"Several miles out of the village, in one of the handsomest farm-houses I ever saw. It looks imposing enough for one of the 'stately halls of England'; while the princely groves and avenues of trees strengthen the impression."

"It is lovely, isn't it?" said his sister. "I rode past it once last summer, and thought it my *beau ideal* of a country residence. But it seems to me, I have heard a rumor that the place is under mortgage, and likely to be sold."

"Yes; I am afraid it will have to go," said Mr. West, regretfully. Eldridge has involved himself deeply, paying debts and giving securities for a rascally young nephew. I don't know what possesses him to do it; but the fellow's mother was a favorite sister of Eldridge's, who married young and unwisely, and, dying, besought her brother to befriend the boy. The young scapegrace is in Paris now, ostensibly doing business for his uncle, but really squandering his

money as fast as he can. I think Mr. Eldridge has come to understand his game pretty well; and anxiety about the matter has probably aggravated his illness."

Florence caught the word "Paris," and, forgetting her friend, her thoughts immediately flew to Charley, and she wondered if he knew anything about the young man in question.

"You might ask him, Florence, in your next letter," said her uncle, more gravely, she thought, than the subject demanded; then, with compressed lips, he rose, and walked the floor, as he always did when annoyed. Florence thought he was taking Mr. Eldridge's troubles very much to heart, and, half-reproaching herself for her own want of sympathy, retired to her room.

She sat down and took up her books, but her thoughts flew back to the conversation of the evening, and could not be recalled to the "Arma virumque," of Virgil, or to the lines and angles of geometry. That "inevitable," of which her uncle and aunt had spoken, stood before her, a

grim, haunting phantom. What was it? What did it portend? She thought she had tasted the keenest sorrow of which the human heart is capable, when she stood by her mother's open grave, and felt the utter desolation of the thought that she should see her face no more, Yet even that anguish had been softened and subdued, till now the thought of her mother was a tender memory, or a sweet and sacred hope. Could there be a deeper grief than this one, which would admit of no consolation, which would fill the past with bitterness, and the future with despair?

> "God gives us love; something to love
> He lends us, —"

she mused, but what if love itself be taken, or clouded all over with suspicion and distrust? What if even her religious faith should be shaken, and doubts arise of that "Friend above all others," the divine Savior whom she trusted? The spectre before her was lost in a thick mist, that seemed settling down over a vast expanse of

dark, cold waters, where phantom ships were drifting without a rudder or an anchor. She shuddered. She began to fear she had done wrong in allowing, and even urging her uncle to lead her where she could feel the chilling breath that blew across this sea, — this dreary, shoreless sea of doubt. She shrank from the struggle with wind and tide, fearing that even should strength be given to outride the storm, there would be nothing beyond, in the regions of intellectual conviction, which could compensate for the loss of the secure harbor of childlike, unquestioning faith, in which she had rested heretofore. Yet she dimly recognized the fact that every strong, active, vigorous soul, — every one who does not remain motionless on the sea of life, must meet the storm sometime, and feel the impulse of adverse currents. So she resolved to nerve herself for the struggle, and, looking upward for the strength in which alone she could hope for victory, she was calm and trustful again.

A few days later, she was spending an afternoon at the parsonage, and mentioned to her pastor the proposed readings with her uncle.

"Ah!" he said, in a tone of pleased surprise, "I am glad he is willing to undertake the investigation. I hope it will do him good. You must deal faithfully with his objections."

"O Mr. Richards!" she exclaimed, in real distress, "I am so utterly incompetent for the task. I know so little of the subtleties of infidelity, or the arguments by which to meet them. I cannot discuss the subject with one so much older and more learned than I. If our commentator does not answer his objections, I fear they must remain unanswered."

"Scott will answer a great many of them," replied the pastor, "while his general tone of candor and earnestness will go far to silence others. But the good old man lived some time ago, you know, and many of the types of modern skepticism had not confronted him. You will need to glean from other sources, and

above all," he added impressively, "you must seek wisdom from Him who "giveth liberally and upbraideth not.' "

"Yes, I feel deeply my need of that," she anewered. "And I hope I shall have your prayers and your counsel."

"The former you shall certainly have, and I will gladly assist you in any other way I can. My books are at your service, and if you want me to help you out of any dfficulties, do not hesitate to come to me, though I can hardly promise to answer all the questions you may ask."

"What books would you recommend?"

"Have you ever studied the "Evidences of Christianity" at school?"

"No, I have not reached that part of the course yet."

"Well you can anticipate that branch of your education," he said, rising and opening the door of his study. "Here is 'Paley,' or, if you wish something more simple and practical to

begin with, take "Nelson on Infidelity," or Patterson's series of tracts on the same subject. Then there are a host of others—'Watson's answer to Paine,' 'Jew's Letters to Voltaire,' 'Newton on Prophecy,' 'Philosophy of the plan of Salvation,' etc. 'The Eclipse of Faith' you will find a rich intellectual treat, if you are fond of nice distinctions and metaphysical subtleties, while it presents some of the difficulties of infidelity in a light that may be useful to Mr. West."

"And shall I read Uncle Percy's books, too?"

"You can hardly refuse to do so while you ask him to read yours. No one can fully investigate any subject without 'reading on both sides.' I would not by any means place such books promiscuously before the young, or encourage their careless reading, but would guard them as the druggist does his poisons. Still, these have their place in the chemist's laboratory, and so to the careful seeker after truth, even works of error

may be useful. You must know what weapons the enemies of Christianity use, if you would arm yourself to meet them; you must see infidelity in its naked deformity, in order to have all the energies of your nature roused against it. But remember, Florence, such ground is not to be trodden lightly, or in a self-confident spirit. Let it be with much prayer, and with a firm purpose to find the truth and reject all error. Let us look up for divine direction, now." And, kneeling there, the pastor fervently besought the Spirit of all truth to guide this young disciple, and to enlighten the understanding and subdue the heart of her unbelieving friend.

Florence carried home a few of the volumes her pastor had reccommended, and began to study "Evidences,—" not as they are usually studied at school, with no deeper interest or higher motive than to acquit one's self well at recitation, but with the absorbing earnestness of one who examines the title deed of a vast inheritance, or listens to testimony in a trial whose

result he knows will "make or undo him quite."

Was the pastor wrong in allowing that the works of infidelity might be read at all? I answer, Christianity can only lose when it refuses to meet its enemies in open field. It overrates their strength; it is needlessly afraid of their weapons; it gives them occasion to accuse it of conscious weakness.

Again, the well-known fascination attending forbidden things makes the books in question more dangerous, when read in secret, than they would be if brought to light, their errors pointed out, and their weakness exposed.

Will any say, on the other hand, that he defeated his own attempt at candor by guarding his permission so carefully?

I reply in the words of Mrs. Browning:—

> "Sublimest danger, over which none weeps,
> When any young wayfaring soul goes forth
> Alone, unconscious of the perilous road,
> To thrust his own way, he an alien, through
> The world of books."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BIBLE READINGS.

SEVERAL weeks passed before Mr. West found time and inclination to begin his readings with Florence; but, at length, a rainy Sabbath afforded an opportunity not to be gainsayed, and he told his niece she might bring her books into the library after breakfast, and they would begin their proposed task. She did so with alacrity, and found him comfortably established in his arm-chair, waiting to hear her read. She began with that brief summary of the proofs of Divine inspiration with which Scott

The Bible Readings. page 82.

prefaces his Family Bible. Mr. West listened attentively, making but few comments. When she was in the midst of the paragraph on "the agreement of the sacred writers among themselves," he remarked that he thought they should find some *dis*-agreement as they proceeded. Florence looked up with a smile, and then emphasized the next sentence; "Apparent inconsistencies may indeed perplex the superficial reader, but they will vanish after a more accurate investigation." To which he merely answered, "We shall see." The arguments from prophecy and miracles he was not disposed to admit, but referred the discussion of them to a later stage of the investigation. When she had finished the preface, Mr. West took his turn, and read the first chapter of Genesis, without much reference to the notes, and making no comment of his own, till he reached the twenty-seventh verse, when he said, —

"I should like to know what became of the man and woman created on the sixth day; for,

if you turn to the fifth verse of the next chapter, you will find that, after the Sabbath, there was 'not a man to till the ground.'"

Florence looked up in astonishment. She began to think that if her uncle's objections were all like this, they were not very formidable, and she had been needlessly afraid of them. "Why Uncle," she exclaimed, "don't you see this is a recapitulation of the events narrated in the first chapter? 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth, *in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, and every plant of the field before it was in the earth,*' —— he has got no farther than the third day now, you see, — of course there was 'not a man to till the ground' then, and the fact is only mentioned to show that the plants were created by God himself without any intermediate agency." She laughed, as she said, "I don't wonder you think the historian was not divinely inspired; I should think you would go farther and say that he had not his senses when he wrote, if you suppose

that, in writing the second chapter, he forgot about the creation of man, mentioned in the first."

He was nettled by her merriment, more than he cared to show; for he could not help feeling that it was just, and that he had been a very careless reader, but he insisted that the language was somewhat ambiguous, to say the least.

"And, any way, that is a minor point," he continued. "This whole account of the creation is so very unlike God's usual methods of working, that to receive it as true, requires more credulity than I possess."

"And how much are we supposed to know of God's methods of working? Here in this little atom of the universe, occupying a mere point of time with our brief existence, it seems to me we ought to be careful how we generalize, lest the Lord answer us as he did Job out of the whirlwind, — 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth.'"

"Florence, don't be facetious at the expense

of candor," he answered, somewhat sternly. "Though we have not been eye-witnesses of past events, their records are as enduring as the world itself, of whose structure they form a part."

"And what are these records in the rocks, but indications of changes as vast, and eras as marked, as those of which Moses speaks. I tell you, Uncle Percy, the miracles of the Bible never seemed to me so probable, so easy of belief, as since I have learned something of the miracles of geology. If we resort to the testimony of the rocks we certainly have abundant proof that, between the far-off 'beginning' and the present order of things, God has worked in a great variety of ways."

"But always slowly and deliberately, Florence, — never in a hurry. No doubt the Almighty *could* create a world from nothing in six days, or in a moment; but it is much more reasonable to suppose it was the work of ages. It takes a whole summer, for a little flower to grow and

blossom, and years are required to perfect a tree. We have some examples before us of the formation of islands and continents; but it is done atom by atom, the work of microscopic insects, or the gradual deposition of sediment by water. And geology proves that the same methods have always prevailed."

"Some geologic changes were not very gradual, — the subsidence and upheaval of large tracts of land by volcanic action, for instance, — or the sudden change of temperature which froze the Siberian elephants fast in ice. But, even granting all you say about the length of time required, there is nothing in the Bible to contradict it. 'In the beginning' was doubtless uncounted ages before the 'first day,' and the days themselves, may have been long periods of time. There is no evidence that they were only twenty-four hours long. They certainly were not measured by the revolution of the sun, for the first three days passed before there was any sun."

"Yet there was light."

"But you know, Uncle, the sun is not considered a generator of light, merely a 'light-bearer.' These arguments surely are not new to you, what is the use of my repeating them?" she said, deprecatingly, for she began to fear he was only questioning her for his own amusement.

"No, Florence; they are not altogether new, though you have made some suggestions, which never occurred to me,—but they seem, to my mind, somewhat far-fetched, made up to suit the occasion, with an evident effort to reconcile Science and Scripture."

"That idea of extending the time of creation is older than geology, is it not? I have read that some of the early church fathers placed the 'beginning' as far back as any modern geologist could ask, and, if I mistake not, lengthened the 'days' of creation, too."

"In all these long ages, then, there was time enough for the production of the higher types of animal and vegetable life, from the lower, and

these from inorganic matter, by a process of gradual development."

"Time enough, I suppose, if the thing were to be done; but from what analogy of nature do you infer such a process?"

"The different grades of life form such a continuous chain, from the lowest to the highest, it is very natural to suppose they grew out of one another."

"But though the species seem so closely related, we never catch them in the process of transmutation, neither do we see inorganic matter assuming the forms of animal and vegetable life."

"You have heard of spontaneous vegetation, have you not? and of pure water suddenly teeming with infusorial animals?"

"But, Uncle, how can we obtain earth which is entirely free from seed, or water which does not contain the germs of animal life? Earth and sea and air are full of these germs, as the microscope shows, and perhaps, even to a greater extent, than any instrument has yet revealed."

"You understand something of Darwin's theory, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes, a little," was the answer; "but what in the universe he founds it on, is what I have always been perplexed to know. I should think any one that can receive his airy hypotheses might have 'credulity' enough to believe the Bible, even if it rested on far weaker evidence than it does. By the way" she added, "did you ever see the malicious little travesty of that same theory? —

"A deer, with a neck that was longer, by half,
Than the rest of its family's — try not to laugh —
By stretching and stretching became a Giraffe,
Which nobody can deny."

And when he said, dryly, that he had not had that pleasure, she continued, her eyes dancing all the while, —

"A very large pig with a very long nose,
Sends forth a proboscis quite down to his toes,
And then by the name of an elephant goes,
Which nobody can deny.

"An ape with a pliable thumb and big brain,
When the 'gift of the gab' he had managed to gain,
As lord of creation established his reign,
Which nobody can deny."

"It is a great deal easier to ridicule a theory than to disprove it," said her uncle, "and you must remember, too, that the weapon of ridicule cuts both ways — I may turn it upon you yet."

"I know it is a questionable kind of argument, or rather no argument at all," she confessed," but those lines were so irresistibly funny, I couldn't help quoting them."

"And I can't help thinking a man might develop from a monkey quite as easily as a woman from man's rib,— eh! my fair antagonist?"

"Oh! that wasn't development; that was direct creation, as much as in Adam's case, and a rib was as good material to start with, as the dust of the earth. And only think how many valuable suggestions about matrimonial duties would have been lost, had any other method of procedure been adopted."

Mr. West laughed, and rose to open the door for his sister, who was tapping at it, and asking, "Do you sit with closed doors, or are your discussions open to the public?"

"We couldn't expect the public to appreciate them," he answered, pompously. "They're too abstruse for ordinary minds to grasp."

"And so very convincing, I suppose, that you are each confirmed in your own opinion."

"I presume so," he answered, carelessly, —

> "Man convinced against his will,
> "Is of the same opinion still,"

you know."

"When you come to the discussion of Adam's apostasy," said Fanny, "may I be there to hear, — if you can bring the subject down to my comprehension."

"The next rainy Sabbath, then, at this place and hour," appointed Mr. West, yawning, and going to the window with a "Whew! how it pours!" Beating a tattoo upon the pane for a

minute, he turned, with an impatient gesture, seized his hat and overcoat, and went out for a turn on the verandah, in place of his accustomed walk. When he came in, he proposed that they should all go into the parlor for some music.

"But where is Mary?" he asked. "I haven't seen her since breakfast."

Miss West did not know, — thought she was in her room; and Mr. West started in search of her, promising to join them in the parlor.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BIBLE READINGS (*Continued*).

AT Miss West's solicitation, the next installment of the discussion was not put off for a rainy day, but was undertaken on the afternoon of the following Sabbath.

Miss West was herself the reader on this occasion, and, beginning with the third chapter of Genesis, read a few verses, and stopped short, with the remark, —

"This sounds wondrously like the fables of Æsop, Florence. Do you really believe the serpent talked with Eve, in the garden of Eden?"

"I believe the evil spirit which tempted her assumed that form; or, perhaps, the name was only given him as an emblem of his cunning and deceit."

"That was the beginning of spirit communications, then, was it?"

"I suppose so; and I think modern ones are like unto it, proceeding from the same source, and productive of no better results."

"I leave you to discuss that question with those more interested in it than I am," said Miss West. "But what kind of a tree do you suppose the tree of knowledge was, and what did its fruit look like?"

"I do not know," said Florence, frankly; then added, with an arch smile, "Eve's curiosity about it was satisfied at a dear rate, you know."

"Florence, do you call it an evidence of God's goodness to place such a temptation in the way of his creatures?" interposed Mr. West.

"Temptation is good for us, isn't it, Uncle? You know what Dr. Holland says,—

'We may win
By toil, endurance; saintly fortitude by pain;
Patience by suffering; faith and strength by fear.
But the great stimulus that stirs to life,
And crowds to generous development
Each chastened power and passion of the soul,
Is *the temptation of that soul to sin*
Resisted and re-conquered evermore.

"But this temptation was not resisted, and God knew it would not be, when he placed it before his creatures, whom he seems to have created only to destroy."

"'Only to destroy!' As if he had made no provision to save them!" she said, earnestly.

"A few of them," he suggested.

"All who will accept salvation," she answered; and then, as he said no more, she continued,—"Be that as it may, we know the world is full of temptations, and of God's creatures who weakly yield to them. The introduction of evil into the world may be a knotty problem; but it is one the Deist must solve, as well as the Christian. Here is the evil all around us; we don't need the

Bible to reveal its existence, nor need we look any farther than our own hearts and lives, to find enough of it to prove our relationship to Adam, and condemn us utterly in the sight of God."

"I don't know about that," said Mr. West, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't feel much like a condemned criminal, myself. I believe I'm a pretty good sort of fellow, on the whole."

"I'm glad you have such a good opinion of yourself," said his sister. "I doubt if any one else has. For my own part, I must confess, I find a good deal of wickedness in my nature, call it 'original sin,' or what you will. Although doing right seems easy and pleasant enough in theory, I am very far from keeping up to my standard in practice. But are we accountable for these defects in our organization, these sins we commit almost against our will,—is the question with me."

"However that may be," said Florence, "it is a law of nature, as well as of the Bible, that sin

brings suffering, whether it springs from pure perversity or inherited tendencies. The drunkard transmits the appetite for strong drink to his child; but, if the latter does not overcome it, he cannot escape the drunkard's doom by laying the sin at his father's door. The law would not let a thief go free because the phrenologist declared his mental conformation to be such that he could not help stealing. We should be all the more anxious to secure him, because that fact makes him more dangerous to the public safety. Surely, all the analogies of natural and of social laws, confirm the declaration of the Bible in regard to 'visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children.'"

"It is all a strange, dark mystery," said Fanny, sadly. "Sometimes I am tempted to doubt both Nature and Revelation, — to consider everything the work of blind chance, or of some malicious demon."

"Oh no, Fanny, it is not so bad as that," said her brother. "We see too many evidences of

God's wisdom and goodness in the works of nature, to doubt the perfections of his character, though some things seem dark and inexplicable."

"Dear uncle, why not say the same of the Bible?" urged Florence, with an earnestness which could not be repressed. "Where do we see the love of God displayed more rich and full, more free and glorious, than there?" Where do we find fewer mysteries? If we look into the realms of nature, we confront them on every side. Our very being is a mystery; and this life we live,—I don't know much about it by experience, yet; but I've seen and heard things which make me shrink from the revelations of the years to come. Do you remember one of Mrs. Stowe's characters, when overwhelmed with distrust and anguish, by standing face to face with these mysteries of which we have been talking, said that the only refuge she could find was in the cross of Christ? Everywhere else, she found the evidences of God's goodness standing side by side with things that

made her shudder; but here, on Calvary, she felt that, surely, there was never love like this.

"O Uncle Percy! the Bible does not place us in the ruined condition which it describes as the result of the fall. It finds us there, and undertakes, by warning and entreaty, by threatening and by promise, by severity and by tenderness, by the life and death of the Son of God himself, to lift us out of this fallen condition, to lead us up to the glory which 'eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man.'"

Fanny West had drawn nearer to her niece as she was speaking, and now, taking her hand, said earnestly, "I wish I could believe as you do, Florence."

"I wish you could, Annt Fanny! It is a faith I would not part with for the world!"

Mr. West said nothing, but he pondered for a little while.

Only a little while, and his mind reverted to more congenial subjects. This was the last of

the Bible readings in which he took part. The season of the spring court was approaching, and as he was employed on several important cases, he said that his time and thoughts were too fully occupied to allow this subject due attention. He needed the week-days for work, and the Sabbaths for rest and recreation. So the study of the Bible was dropped "for the present" he said; but the time did not soon come when he thought he had leisure to resume it.

His sister continued the study, at intervals, by herself, and sometimes talked with Florence about what she was reading; but her softened, wistful moods were rare; she usually seemed indifferent or sarcastic.

Florence could only pray.

CHAPTER IX.

LESSONS OF DISTRUST.

THE remainder of the school year passed very quickly to Florence, and very pleasantly. In the busy round of studies and recitations, the pleasurable excitement of successful emulation, the love of her schoolmate and the love of her teachers, she almost lost herself. She was conscious of nothing but a constant delight, a sense of joy and triumph and exultation, an unnatural buoyancy of spirits, which, rising to a flood-tide during the weeks of examination and exhibition, in which her part was a brilliant suc-

cess, ebbed suddenly, and left her in a state of lassitude and depression. She was in just the condition now to imbibe the subtle poison of the atmosphere of infidelity which surrounded her. She was too weak and exhausted to feel very positive about anything, and her religious faith was fast losing its strength and fervency. Life began to seem aimless and dreary, and the future a dim phantom. In this mood, she was looking listlessly along the library shelves one day, when she noticed a volume of translations from Goethe and, taking it down, began to read eagerly. The sneering, bitter skepticism of some of his characters first repelled, then fascinated her. Half-harmonizing with her restless mood, it led her on, a spell-bound captive, till finally, at one of the darkest passages, a fierce, sudden grasp seemed to clutch at the region where life is, and wrench out the last remnant of love and hope, and faith in things divine. She threw the book from her with a sudden cry, and buried her face in her hands, while a feeling of desolation and anguish

such as she had never known before, took possession of her being. Her uncle entered the library, half an hour afterward, and, surprised at her posture, touched her gently and spoke her name.

She shivered and made no answer.

"Florence, my child, what is it? Can't you tell me?" he continued, in a voice of tender solicitude, at which she threw her arms about his neck and wept spasmodically, He was thoroughly alarmed, for he had never seen his niece in this hysterical state before, and he rightly judged that her nervous system had been sadly overtasked. He did not question her further, but, half lifting her in his arms, he placed her on a sofa, and pressing a cool hand upon her burning forehead, stroked it gently, till the rigid muscles relaxed and she sank into a quiet slumber.

Taking warning from this incident, he resolved to watch her more carefully, and see that her vacation was made a season of perfect rest and relaxation. The rides and walks and cheerful

company which her uncle prescribed, brought back color to her cheeks and vivacity to her manner, and he congratulated himself on her recovery. But he did not know, that by the same process, he had saved her from a worse evil than physical suffering,— the loss of her holy faith.

As she grew stronger, she began to read again, and found, to her relief, that Goethe had lost his weird spell, that she could admire his beauties and still be unmoved by his dark suggestions of evil. She looked,— not with idle curiosity or vain self-confidence, but guarding her soul with the amulet of prayer, into some books of more decided skeptical tendency. She followed Renan through his dreamy hypothetical narrative: she listened to the voice of that airy phantom which spoke to Volney amid the "Ruins of Empires;" and she wondered how such vagaries as these could be opposed to the strong, earnest utterances of prophets and apostles, who proved their sincerity by lives of toil and suffering, and sealed their testimony with their blood. She glanced

at Paine and Voltaire; and she felt her heart rise up again in indignation at these malicious, venomous attempts to malign the Holy Book whose greatest offense was that its purity shamed the wicked lives of its traducers. Sometimes, indeed, a crafty insinuation or specious argument would stagger her for a moment; but, turning to her Bible, she would read carefully the obnoxious passage, comparing it with others of like import, and perhaps referring to Barnes' Notes, or her good old commentator, Scott; and she always found that, the more she examined such passages, the more their seeming darkness turned to glorious light.

The time for the re-opening of school was approaching, and, on account of Florence's unsettled health, it was decided that she should attend another year in the village, though she had anticipated going from home to complete her education. She was more than half glad to put it off, however, for, though she might enjoy some higher privilege elsewhere, she had formed very

strong attachments here. Anna Eldridge was back this term, but she seemed completely to have changed from her former, merry self. The sable garments she wore, spoke of her bereavement, as did her pale face and altered manner; but there was a restless sadness in her eye, a look of defiant scorn and bitterness about her mouth, which seemed to indicate a more inconsolable sorrow than the mourning for "one whom God had taken."

"You know all about it, I suppose," said Anna, as she and Florence walked back and forth upon the sidewalk, at the close of the first day's school,—about dear papa's death, and the rest of the sad changes. I believe father foresaw what was coming, after he became too ill to do anything, and anxiety about it hastened his end. To think that cousin Harry could treat him so shamefully! O Florence, I hope you will never find your love and confidence so misplaced as ours has been in him!"

"The old lesson of distrust," thought Flor-

ence, "must I confront that again?" But to her friend, she only said,—

"Are you sure, Anna, that he has proved himself unworthy?"

"Yes, there's no room to doubt it. He has always been getting into scrapes of some sort, and wheedling father into helping him out, and finally, under pretense of making business investments as his agent, has cheated us out of all our property. Our dear old home is sold, and mother and I are living in a tenement-house in the village, while I must make haste to finish my education, and then teach school for a living. Heigh ho! not the programme I had arranged for myself at all. And the worst of it is that Harry should be the cause, — Harry, whom I loved as a brother, whom I thought the soul of honor, and nobleness, and generosity. Pshaw! I don't believe there are such things in the world!"

"O Anna, don't make such sweeping assertions. Don't judge all mankind by one unworthy example."

"Florence, if Harry Burton had the stuff in him for a scoundrel, I don't know of any young man in the world who has not. It wants only circumstances to bring it out."

"I can hardly wonder you feel so, Anna dear," said Florence; "but I would not yield to such thoughts, if I were you."

A defiant look and a curl of the lip were Anna's only answer. She was evidently determined to foster rather than repress her distrust.

Florence related the conversation to her Aunt Fanny that evening, when the latter said,—

"I know how to sympathize wlth the poor child. It is a bitter thing to find the object of one's confiding love, unworthy. I once passed through such an ordeal myself, and it made me doubt every thing for a while,—even God in heaven."

"O Aunt Fanny! I should think you would have clung to Him the more, when others failed you."

"Don't call me aunt, say Fanny;"—and

sitting down on the floor beside her niece, Miss West drew her arm about Florence. — "I am only a few years older than you, no wiser, save in sad experience, less calm, and strong, and self-sustained. Call me Fanny; be my friend, companion, helper. Make me stronger and better, more like your own, dear self!"

Florence was surprised and mystified by this new mood of her aunt's, and hardly knew how to respond to it. She only stroked the head that lay upon her lap, and pleaded,—

"Don't talk so, dear aunt,— or dear friend, if that will please you better — I can't bear to hear you so depreciate yourself and over-estimate me."

"If you could only teach me to see life as you do!" she continued, scarcely heeding the response. "If I only had some satisfactory theory of life, and, above all, some settled religious faith! I wish Percy had been inclined to continue that investigation of the Bible, or that you and I had gone on without him. If there is truth any where, I want to find it."

"Oh, there is! there is!" said Florence earnestly. "Can't you throw away that if, and come to Him who is the way, the truth, and the life?"

"How can I come to Him in whom I do not believe?" she asked, impatiently. "My judgement must be convinced, before my will can act."

"Do you mean that every mystery must be solved, everything in the Bible made perfectly clear and plain to your comprehension, before you will receive it? I sometimes think we began at the wrong end of the investigation last winter. If we wanted to satisfy ourselves of the genuineness of the Declaration of Independence, we should go to history, should we not, rather than to the document itself? So it seems to me, if we wish to learn whence the Bible came, and what its authority is, we should not commence by picking it to pieces to see if it agrees with our own ideas of what a revelation from God ought to be; but should inquire into the circumstances under which it was written, the charac-

ter of its authors, the proofs they gave of sincerity, and reliability, and their knowledge of the things they wrote about. I like the way Patterson goes about it here," she said, taking up his 'Fables of Infidelity and Facts of Faith," which lay on a table beside her. "He first asks 'Have we any need of the Bible?' and, by a rapid glance through history, shows how poorly men have succeeded in living without it; then, announcing his plan of investigation to be the inductive — 'One thing at a time, and the nearest first," — he begins with the inquiry, 'Who wrote the New Testament?' Collecting and weighing the historical evidence, he decides that these books are not, and cannot be forgeries, that whether true or false, they are the words of those men whose names they bear. Then the question is, 'Can we believe Christ and his Apostles?' He examined the proofs of their truthfulness, such as the character they bore, the style of their testimony, their coincidences with each other and with profane historians. Having

proved that they were not trying to deceive others, he shows in the next tract, that it was, from the nature of the case, impossible that they should be themselves deceived. The claims of the New Testament established, he proceeds to the Old. I wish you would read the book."

"I will," said Fanny. "But are these historical evidences very valuable, while the history of more modern times is becoming so unsettled? William Tell and Pocahontas, you know, are banished to the realms of fable, and even our own Revolutionary history is undergoing revision."

"I know it; and have thought of the relation of such facts to the subject we are considering, and sometimes, I confess, have been a little dismayed by them. But after all, the exposure of these time-honored humbugs ought, instead of making us distrust all history, to give us greater faith in those records which have stood the test of investigation. And then, there is scarcely an event in ancient or modern history so well at-

tested, as the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If the life of William Tell had been written by four different persons who were eye-witnesses of his deeds, and these again attested by letters from several others who also spoke from personal sight and knowledge, we might defy the world to prove him a myth. So of Pocahontas and the rest.

"But the story of Christ belongs to such a different age."

"Not to an age of fable, however; but to the golden period of Roman literature. That was no time for myths and forgeries and impositions—scarcely more favorable than the present; certainly less so, than the darkness of the Middle Ages."

Miss West sat thoughtfully turning the leaves of the book, and made no answer.

CHAPTER X.

BABY ALICE.

THE autumn leaves were still flaming with gold and crimson, when a little daughter came to gladden the household of Percy West, and open anew the founts of parental tenderness within his heart. It was touching, and yet half amusing, to witness the strong man's devotion to the helpless infant. He would hasten home from the office to sit by her cradle, or hold her in his arms, and could hardly bear to have her out of his sight for a moment. An unexpressed foreboding seemed to haunt him,

that she might melt away from his embrace, and leave him desolate again. But as the months passed, and she grew round and chubby, without a hint of the ethereal, or a trace of budding wings, he grew more secure in the possession of his treasure, and lost his vague apprehensions in the proud, happy sense of ownership.

And not alone to her father did baby Alice come with both chubby hands full of choicest blessings; she seemed bent on a kindly mission to them all. As she grew in beauty and winsomeness, she found her way into every heart. Aunt Fanny's grew warmer and softer under her influence, while Florence found, in joining her baby frolics, a pleasant diversion from the studies she was prone to become too much absorbed in for her good. To the mother, her ministry was the same that these little cherubs all unconsciously perform, — purifying, exalting, sweeping clean of selfishness the heart in which they nestle; teaching, day by day, new mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, whose inhabitants and ambassadors they are.

Mrs. West was saying something of the kind to her husband, one evening, as she sat near him with the little one in her arms; but he only looked into her eyes with a smile, half-tender, half-satirical, saying, "Never mind about the kingdom of heaven, we've kingdom enough and treasure enough, here." Then, leaning forward, he buried his face among the folds of baby's robes, while she clutched his hair with her chubby hands, laughing and crowing in the fulness of delight.

Fanny came in at this moment, and demanded, "Percy West, where's that pen you promised to leave at the jeweller's for repairs? I called for it this evening, and behold, no pen was there."

Mr. West looked up, with a comical expression of dismay, and a prolonged "O-o-o—" which Fanny cut short by saying,—

"Of course you never thought about it, nor anything else but that baby. I wish you wouldn't make a fool—." She checked herself, and, kissing the little one, said in a softer tone, "We're

all fools over her, I believe;" then, snatching the child from father and mother both, she bore her aloft in triumph as she quickly made the circuit of the room, Mr. West pursuing her, and protesting against such a "bold stroke of kidnapping."

The pen was forgotten, and so was Fanny's ill-temper.

Mrs. West sat silent through it all, wishing in her heart, that her husband could sympathize with the heavenward aspirations to which she was slowly awakening.

Florence came in just then, with a bound, holding a letter in her hand, which she flourished gleefully, with the delighted announcement, "From Charley!" then danced up to the lamp, and sat down to devour its contents. She seemed a little puzzled by one paragraph, and, looking up, said, "Why, Uncle! Charley says he is well acquainted with that Harry Burton, having had some business relations with him, and he likes him, knows no harm of him, and says I must

not believe anything bad about him, for he's one of his best friends. That doesn't tally very well with what people here say about him."

"Nor with facts," said Mr. West, his brow contracting. "This intimacy promises no good to Charles. I saw through Harry Burton before he went away from here, and felt uneasy when I learned that business was bringing him into close association with Charles. I warned the boy, but without effect, it seems. Suppose you try your hand at remonstrance."

Florence looked troubled. The idea that her brother could do anything which even allowed criticism or remonstrance, was one which had never occurred to her before, and still less had she ever thought of taking upon herself the performance of such a task. Her uncle saw what was passing in her mind, and reproached himself for the pain he was giving; still he feared, that, unless he opened her eyes gradually, a sudden and cruel awakening was in store for her. He regarded her for a moment with a look of kind

solicitude, then, as she was still silent, said gently, —

"What do you say, Florence? If your brother is in danger, you will leave no means untried to save him?"

"In danger, Uncle Percy?" she said. "How? Pecuniarily or morally?"

"Both, I fear. Especially the latter."

"O Uncle! he will not be influenced to his hurt. He is too good, too steadfast in the right for that."

"Florence, a certain book you are very fond of, asks the significant question, 'Can a man take coals of fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?'"

"But what can I say? He has always advised me, not I him."

"Say what your own womanly and sisterly instincts prompt. I will not attempt to dictate, since my own warning proved of no avail."

Florence went to her room, and after a "good cry," and what was far better, a fervent prayer,

wrote a letter to her brother, in which she strove to make him share her own apprehensions, and shake off, in time, this unworthy friendship. It was of little avail however, for, when he wrote again, his only answer to this part of her letter was, "Don't worry about me, little sis; I'm big enough to take care of myself. I'm not so easily frightened as I was in the days when Nurse used to tell us about the 'black man' coming to carry us off." This, very naturally, had the effect on her perverse human nature of making her worry the more.

There were other suggestions in the letter, too, which greatly increased her anxiety—hints of gayeties and dissipations in which she did not suppose he was accustomed to indulge—and, worse than all, an utter disregard of the Sabbath which he evidently considered a mere day of amusement. She knew what the influences of Paris were in that respect, but had not imagined that he would forget his early education and Christian principles, far enough to yield to them. She said some-

thing of the kind to her uncle, when he read the letter — not expecting much sympathy, perhaps, yet hardly prepared for his hard, indifferent answer.

"If his Sabbath-breaking and theatre-going were his worst crimes, I should have more hope of him than I have now."

"Uncle Percy, what do you mean!" she exclaimed, half in anger, half in apprehension. "These things are bad enough, what else has he done?"

"Never mind, now, Florence; perhaps, nothing else; I hope this is all; but we'll talk about these offenses again, sometime."

With this unsatisfactory answer she had to content herself.

She was a good deal vexed with her uncle, and her heart sank when she thought of Charley; so, for a few days, she made herself pretty miserable; but her school was so full of interest, and life altogether such a pleasant thing, she could not have harbored these feelings long if she had tried, and they soon passed away.

One sunny Saturday, not long after, she sat sewing with Aunt Fanny, in the cosy back-parlor, near her uncle's favorite oriel window. The sunshine streamed brightly over a fine collection of plants in full bloom, the fire in the grate gave out a cheery glow, and the whirr of the sewing-machine kept time to the busy fingers and animated talk of the workers.

On a table, near which Florence sat, was the book she had asked her aunt to read; and, in a pause of the work, she took it up, asking her if she had finished it.

"Not quite," was the answer. "I read the chapter on Prophecy, last evening."

"How does it strike you?"

"There are some marked coincidences, surely, between the predictions of the Bible and the events of history; but I am inclined to think them nothing more."

"Aunt Fanny, could it possibly *happen* that events should take place, exactly coinciding with all these predictions, — that, numerous, varied,

and minute as they are, not one should be unfulfilled, save those which relate to time yet in the future?"

"Are not some of these, after all, mere fancied coincidences? The prophecies are expressed in figurative language, and may be made to fit almost anything."

"Some of them are plain enough, surely, and were well understood before their fulfillment. You know how the Jewish priests pleased Alexander by reading to him the prophecies of his success; how that nation, and, to some extent the whole world, were looking for the Messiah at the time of his coming. The disciples understood the Savior's warnings about the destruction of Jerusalem well enough to escape from the city at just the right time; and the Emperor Julian knew that the Holy City was to remain a desolation, and made a vigorous effort to defeat the fulfillment of that prophecy."

The door-bell rang, and Miss West answered the summons, admitting Mr. Richards, who had

called to perfect some arrangements for a festival to be held for the benefit of his church. Miss West was a member of the committee on tableaux, and Florence had been requested to assist in preparing some literary exercises. Business dispatched, Mr. Richards noticed the book which Florence still held in her hand, and remarked, —

"You are engaged in your old study still, I see, Miss Florence."

"Yes, sir," she said, "I believe it is the most interesting one I ever pursued. Aunt Fanny and I have just been discussing this book a little."

"Doesn't she accept its conclusions?" — turning to Miss West, with a smile.

"Not entirely;" said the latter, thus appealed to. "Yet, I must confess, the reasoning usually seems clear and logical enough."

"What then? Are the premises false?"

"I cannot *prove* them so."

"Do you *think* them false? Do you doubt the historical facts on which the argument is founded?"

"I fear they are somewhat mixed with fable; yet I know I cannot justify my scepticism to you, Mr. Richards, — hardly to myself. I cannot refute the 'Evidences of Christianity,' and sometimes, when examining them, feel almost convinced of their truth; but when I close the book, the same dark cloud of unbelief settles down over everything."

"Prayer makes the darkened clouds withdraw," quoted the minister, with gentle emphasis.

"I do pray," was the answer.

"To whom?"

She looked surprised at the question, but presently answered in the words of that beautiful "Universal Prayer," where truth and error are so strangely blended, —

> "Father of all, in every age,
> In every clime adored —"

"Not to the God of the Bible, then?"

"I do not understand the distinction. There is one Supreme Spirit. The Bible calls him by

one name, the Koran by another, the Vedas of the Hindoos by another."

"Nevertheless there is a distinction, as broad as that between worship and blasphemy. 'The Lord our God is one God,' and must not be confounded with Jupiter or Brahma, nor with the abstract ideals of philosophers and dreamers. He is neither the work of men's hands, nor the phantom of their brains, but a real, distinct and glorious personality, revealed to us 'by many infallible proofs,'" He spoke gravely, almost sternly, thus far, then asked, in a milder tone, "Can you not lay aside your doubts, and yield your worship, your love, your service, to this Being?"

"Not yet, Mr. Richards. As I told Florence once, my reason must be convinced, before my will can act."

"I beg pardon, Miss West, but I think your reason is already convinced, and your will is all that holds you back from embracing the Gospel."

Fanny's brow contracted slightly. She had

half a mind to be angry; but, after all, the thing was so courteously spoken, she could hardly take offense at its plainness, so she checked the retort that was rising to her lips, and laughed instead. Looking up, she met the questioning yet deferential gaze of the minister fixed upon her.

"Am I right?" he said, with his serious smile.

"If I deny it, I suppose I shall only furnish additional proof that 'the heart is deceitful above all things,'" she replied evasively,—"and 'desperately wicked,' too, I suppose."

"We scarcely need proof that this is true of the human heart in general, and it is not for me even if I wished, to make offensive personal applications of such truths."

"I do not believe it to be a truth," said Miss West, with more warmth than she had yet shown. "I know there is evil enough in our hearts; but there is much goodness and nobleness too. I cannot and will not believe them so totally depraved as your Bible teaches!"

"*Will* not? Take care or you will prove my

theory" he said smiling; then, more gravely, "We will waive the question of 'total depravity,' if you please. The expression is not in the Bible, I believe, and I would willingly drop it from the creeds. But may I ask if you have not met with exhibitions of 'desperate wickedness' where you least expected them, if you have not seen those who seemed all goodness and nobleness prove themselves akin to demons?"

Miss West started. Could it be Mr. Richards knew what a home thrust this was? No, he was not the man to use the *argumentum ad hominem* in so rude a way as that. He was evidently speaking in general terms, and she answered the question frankly as it was put.

"Yes, I have seen such things; but you must admit we often meet with gleams of goodness in unlikely places, too."

"I do admit it, gladly. Yet I cannot but feel that the tendency of our nature is downward rather than upward. It is a great deal easier, you know, to train children for vice than for virtue."

"Even if this is true," said Fanny, still impatiently, "what is the use of hurling it in our faces from every page of the Bible? If we want to reform a man, we don't begin by calling him a scoundrel."

"Not in the spirit of recrimination and malice, certainly. And I think you greatly overstate the frequency of that truth's recurrence in the Bible. Christ's tender invitations are far more numerous than his upbraidings. Yet we must be convinced of our error before we can be induced to forsake it; must know the extent of our disease, or we shall not come to Christ for healing."

The slippered foot tapped the carpet restlessly, the fair brow was clouded, the lips were defiant and haughty.

"Alas! how much of the scepticism of the age is based upon a false pride, which will not see and acknowledge the soul's deep needs," thought Mr. Richards; but he said no more upon the subject, and presently took his leave.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FESTIVAL.

THE approaching festival was the absorbing topic of thought and conversation for the next two weeks. Florence, and some of the others had a good deal of writing to do; while frequent rehearsals and committee-meetings occupied the attention of all.

"Come home with me, to-night, Anna," said Florence, one evening at the close of school, "and we will prepare our costumes for the 'Coronation of Napoleon.' Aunt Fanny is making the crown, and promises to assist us on the robes."

"I shall have to go home first and get my things, if I do," said Anna.

"Very well; I'll go with you, and see that you don't give me the slip."

They soon reached Anna's home, and entered the house. Anna, with a haughty, dissatisfied air, saying, "This mean little house! I lose my temper every time I come into it!"

"Why, Anna! its tasteful and pretty, I'm sure. You ought to be very happy here, with your mother, your books and music, your birds and your flowers."

"I can't be happy from a sense of duty."

"You can try to forget your unhappiness, and be cheerful and contented for your mother's sake can't you, dear?"

"Perhaps I might if I were one of the saintly sort, like my friend Florence, but I'm only a wicked little sinner, you know. No matter; you're good enough for both of us. I mean to keep close to you, and perhaps your mantle will fall on me, some day."

With which speech Florence was not altogether pleased, whether she viewed it as raillery or flattery.

Anna saw the shadow on her friend's brow, and determined to dissipate it, though without any concession; so she took Florence's arm as they left the house and began chatting and laughing in a merry strain, that seemed so much like the Anna of former days, and was, in itself, so infectious, that, before they reached Mr. West's they were both in high glee.

"Ah! here are the crowns," said Anna, as they entered the parlor; "and as Napoleon isn't here to crown me, I'll crown myself, and no thanks to his majesty;" suiting the action to the word. "Now, my maid of honor, see that you maintain a worshipful demeanor."

"Maid of honor! Not I! Here is an unused crown, and I'm going to put it on, and queen it too, while I can. I am the Queen of Spain, so please you, paying a visit of ceremony to your loftiness."

"You shall be banished from court, and imprisoned in the Bastile for your——"

Here the ringing of the tea-bell put an end to their sport, and sent them scampering up-stairs to prepare for answering its summons.

The evening flew on swift wings, and before their work was nearly finished, the lateness of the hour warned them to lay it aside.

"You must come again, to-morrow evening, and we'll finish them," said Florence.

"'Must is made for the king'—and for the queen—or empress," said Anna, merrily. "And you must remember I am Josephine. But if you will sue humbly for the favor, I'll graciously grant it."

"Well, any way, so that you come. Let's go up-stairs now. Dear me!" she said as they entered her room, "I've scarcely looked at to-morrow's lessons."

"And what if you haven't? You know enough about them, already, to recite as well as any of us. What is the use of studying so in-

dustriously as you do? You could make just as good a show at recitations with half the pains-taking."

"It seems to me that making a show at recitation is hardly the end for which we ought to study."

"Oh, that everlasting 'ought!' You dear, good, conscientious soul, you put me out of all patience with your fastidiousness, do you know it?"

The shadow was returning to Florence's brow but her lips smiled as she said, "I suppose it's not in the nature of things for you to try my patience?"

"Of course it is! You must not expect anything else from me. Don't you know my mission in the world is to tease people, and shock them, and stir them up, generally? But what have we here?" she continued, going to the book-case. "It's my turn to be shocked now. Renan, Strauss, Voltaire,— what under the sun does this mean? I should as soon think of finding Lucifer in Paradise, as these books in your library."

"You see they are offset by Paley, and Butler, and Nelson, and all those noble defenders of the faith. They won't do much harm as long as I keep them in such good company, will they?"

"I don't know. They are rather dangerous creatures. I have found them so, at least."

"You are acquainted with them then? How does that happen? You are hardly the one to censure me."

"Can't you learn there isn't as much to be expected of me as of you? But seriously, Florence,"—with returning gravity,—"I am too well acquainted with such books as these, and they have gone far toward making me bitter and joyless as you see me lately. I would give worlds if I had never touched them."

"They don't seem very formidable to me. Goethe came near upsetting me once, but I was nervous and half-sick. I can read him now with perfect equanimity."

"You rely on your superior strength of mind, I suppose. But you may wish, some day, you had taken my warning."

"Dear Anna, don't misunderstand me. I claim no strength of my own which can defend me against the assaults of infidelity; but it does seem to me that our faith in Christianity need not suffer, but, on the contrary, may even be strengthened, by acquainting ourselves with the objections to it, and with the answers to those objections. Of course I would not take the one without the other, nor either without depending on the strength and wisdom which come down from above. And I don't suppose I should ever have been led into this investigation, but by the hope I had, and still have, of inducing Uncle Percy to read my books, and see the truth as I see it."

"Have you read Beulah?"

"Yes."

"You remember the heroine talked as you do, when warned against perusing infidel books?"

"Not just the same, Anna. She scorned the idea of fearing to investigate, just as I do; but

investigation, with her, was a very partial, one-sided affair. She pored over the speculations of skeptical philosophers, and tried to study out a theology for herself, without once examining the evidences of revealed religion. No wonder she lost herself, and wandered farther from the light, and failed utterly in the object of her search.

"Beulah was a splendid character, wasn't she?" said Anna dreamily. The book had evidently a strong fascination for her.

"Perhaps so; but she seems to me rather overdrawn and unnatural."

"She only seems so in contrast with the milk-and-water characters around her," was the almost spiteful answer. "I hope I shall never live to be a woman, if I can't have some fire and spirit."

"This Beulah is your model, I suppose, and you are going to cultivate skepticism and haughtiness and obstinacy, and all ungracious tempers, in order to reach your ideal womanhood."

Anna laughed and said, "We shall find our-

selves quarreling pretty soon, if we're not careful. Let's go to bed."

"I suppose it is the most sensible thing we can do, as it's almost twelve o'clock," said Florence, consulting her watch.

The next evening, the girls finished their robes and arrayed themselves, Anna in the character of Josephine, and Florence as one of the court ladies. After parading merrily for a while, Anna threw aside the glittering toys with an impatient gesture, and exclaimed, passionately, —

"This mimicry of royalty makes me angry with my poor, meagre life. Why couldn't I have been a princess, I wonder, or at least, have retained the birthright I did possess? I tell you I *will* be rich again, some day."

"They that will be rich, fall into temptation and a snare, —" quoted Florence archly.

"There, don't croak. I tell you, come what will, I'll find some way to the enjoyment of the beauty and luxury wealth can bring."

"O Anna, how little you know of what you're

saying. God forgive you, if you mean all that's involved in it. But come, let us study a while. We shall forget how, before this festival is over, I'm afraid."

"I never knew how, and don't want to know; however, it behooves me to make a show of it now and then, I suppose,"—seating herself demurely and taking up her books.

The evening of the festival came at last, and the gaily decorated hall was filled. The literary entertainment was given first, and proved a decided success. The tableau of the Coronation was loudly encored, and repeated with fine effect. Anna's personation of Josephine was perfect. She was, in air and bearing, every inch a queen; the brilliant costume became her; while the excitement which flushed her cheek and sparkled in her eye made her more beautiful than she had ever been before.

A few essays were read; one by Ellen Ford, terse and forcible; another by Florence, full of earnest thoughts and beautiful sentiments; bu

"She was, in fact, the heroine of the evening." page 141.

Anna's was so daintily worded and so gracefully delivered, that, although of less merit, than either of the others, it elicited more applause. She was, in fact, the heroine of the evening, and richly did she enjoy her triumph. At supper, she was gay and witty, and, after it was over, she stood for some time the centre of an admiring group, dispensing gay witticisms and brilliant repartee. Florence, from a distance, was watching her, unselfishly glad to see her friend enjoying the evening so well.

"I never knew Anna was beautiful," she said to Miss Ames who was near her, "but she certainly is to-night."

Miss Ames watched her silently a moment, and then answered, —

"She has the elements of a splendid womanhood. If she only will not spoil all by her self-will and vanity and love of display. I fear they are her ruling passions. You have a strong influence over her; can't you manage to put her on her guard against these besetting sins?"

"I don't know," said Florence, thoughtfully. "I think you overrate my power. She will hardly yield to any influence, but her own caprices."

"It is a mystery to me what holds you two together, — you are so totally unlike."

"Perhaps that is the very secret of the attraction. 'Each fulfills defect in each.'"

Anna had finally left the gay group around her to seek her friend. "What are you hiding yourself in this corner for," she said. "We are discussing 'Beulah,' and the rest of Miss Evans's novels; and we are all on one side, except Fred Ashley. I told him it was too bad for him to stand alone against so many, — but here he is to speak for himself."

"The young ladies are inclined to be savage with me, Miss Alton," said Ashley, "because I have ventured to criticise Miss Evans's novels. I had almost decided to surrender, when I found you were fighting under the same banner, so I came to you for reinforcements."

"I am hardly prepared to join a crusade against the books in question, though I am surely not so much in love with them as Miss Eldrege is. It seems to me that the style is too wordy and pompous, and the characters frequently overdrawn."

"Good! what do you think of the religious tendency?"

"I think they were designed to promote the interests of Christianity but, whether they do so or not, in any individual case, depends entirely on the reader. One in whom the perceptive faculties predominate, who is keenly alive to impressions and not much given to following long trains of reasoning, might be influenced in a direction contrary to that at which the author aimed."

"You think they were written in good faith, then,—not with a covert design of subverting Christianity?"

"I think so; but the great mistake in 'Beulah' is in trying to blend an abstruse metaphysical argument with so fascinating a story."

"There is a more serious mistake than that, I think, "said Ashley, —" if mistake it be. There is more prominence given to the reasonings on the skeptical side of the argument than on the other. I tell you, I doubt the author's good faith in the matter."

Anna here interposed. "I read the metaphysical parts carefully, after I had done with the story, and I could not find that it bore any very strong testimony to the truth of Christianity."

"It does not," said Florence, "except by a sort of *reductio ad absurdum.* It merely shows how unsatisfactory is the search for religious truth outside the Bible, hoping thus to lead us where alone it can be found."

"Or to lead us away from that fountain, into the mazy paths of speculation, which the author loves so well. But I see no evidence of insincerity in either case. I think she doubts Christianity, and wishes to justify her doubts by showing their origin."

"More unpardonable still," said Ashley. "Doubt should no more be allowed to spread its infection, than any other deadly malady. When any one really thinks he has found a truth to tell us, we cannot forbid him to speak, however strongly we dissent from his conclusions. But while he is groping in the dark, hopeless and blinded, he has no right to try to cast over other minds the same deep pall that rests on his."

"Strange," he continued, musingly, "how the discussion of this subject is pervading all our literature. Scarce a story or poem is written, now-a-days, but has some theological bearing."

"And strange "added Anna," that almost all our great thinkers reject the Bible. How do you account for that fact?"

"Let's ask Mr. Richards," said Florence, as their pastor was approaching the group. The question was repeated to him, and he answered quickly, —

"I do not admit that it is a fact. Spurgeon and the Beechers and —myself,—" he added, mis-

chievously — "are devoting our whole energies, to advocating and enforcing its claims, you know. But, jesting aside, I think you will find the evil not so universal as you imagine, and the most truly learned and intellectual, *less* infected with it than the more superficial class of essayists and story-writers."

"But it surely does prevail to a great extent," persisted Anna. "What reason would you assign?"

"Intellectual pride," said the minister, "which claims to understand 'all mysteries and all knowledge' and rejects the aid of revelation as unnecessary." Turning to Florence, he added, "Your essay this evening had an important bearing on the subject. Did you think of it when you chose for your theme, 'The Realm of Reason?'"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"I was much pleased with the way you handled it. The extent and the limits of that realm were well defined, and you portrayed

strikingly the helplessness of man's intellect when attempting to cope with some of the baffling mysteries of nature. I should like a copy of the essay, if you will favor me."

"You are very kind to ask it," said Florence. "I will try to furnish you with one."

CHAPTER XII.

A YEAR OF PROBATION.

THE festival over, Florence felt worn and listless, and would gladly have rested a while; but studies had been neglected, and must now receive a double share of attention. Examination and exhibition were at hand, and there was no time to dally; so she roused herself to new exertions, and worked with an energy better proportioned to the demands made upon her, than to the strength she had with which to meet them. She kept up bravely while the stimulus of excitement lasted;

but, on the night of the exhibition she took a severe cold, which, in the exhausted state of her system, proved a very serious affair, throwing her into a fever that threatened her life, and from which she did not recover till the summer was far advanced. Even then the physician enjoined the utmost caution in regard to exposure or exertion, and positively forbade her entering school again for a year, at least.

Florence heard this sentence with dismay. How could she remain idle so long?

"I would go, in spite of the doctor," said Anna, who, having called to see her, was informed of the prohibition. "Why, you look as well as I do. I know you will be better off at school than moping here at home."

"Miss Eldrege," said Mr. West, with some sternness, "you seem to forget that the doctor's opinion is worth more than ours in such matters; and you are not helping us reconcile Florence to his decisions. That will be hard enough to do, at best, I fear.

Anna bit her lip and tossed her head slightly, but when Mr. West left the room, she said softly to Florence "I did not mean to hurt you, dear." She did not succeed very well, however, in checking her proclivity to make ill-timed remarks, for her next venture was, "But what in the world will you do with yourself this long year?"

"Oh, help Aunt Mary, for one thing. I shall soon be a capital cook and housekeeper. Then I shall read a little, and sew and walk and ride — and here is Allie, last but not least," she said, catching up the little one from her seat on the carpet, and covering her face with kisses. "Oh, I shall have no lack of employment, or of pleasure." Nevertheless, her lip quivered a little and she had to kiss Allie again to hide her tears.

"What are you going to read? Not those horrid books you've been poring over of late, I hope?"

"The skeptical philosophies, do you mean? No; I've had about enough of them, and theol-

ogy of any kind is rather heavy reading for me, just now. But here is the 'Eclipse of Faith,' which I began before I was sick. I must finish that, I believe."

"Oh, fie! what do you want to read that for?"

"Because it interests me intensely. This is on the right side of the question, you know. Why shouldn't I read it?"

"Neither side is the right one; that is, these speculations are unprofitable, in whatever direction you push them. Your faith is not as strong as it was before you began this investigation, and it never will be again. You needn't attempt to deny it; I know what I'm saying," she added, provokingly, as Florence attempted to reply. The latter was a little touched, and said, earnestly, —

"I don't know why you will persist in judging me by yourself, in this matter. I think the reason your faith was shaken was that you investigated all on one side, like your 'Beulah.'"

"No; I have read some of the 'Evidences of Christianity.'"

"Have you perused them as carefully and pondered them with as much interest as the speculations of your favorite philosophers?"

"You are too inquisitive, my dear. I don't enjoy being catechised," she said, with her merry willfulness; and then, retreating a few steps, she held out her hand to Allie, calling her coaxingly, and the two were soon engaged, with a great deal of earnestness and merriment, in teaching baby to walk.

After Anna left, Mrs. West asked Florence if she was as fond of her friend as ever.

"I believe I am," she answered, "though she often teases and annoys me. For instance, she always claims to know me better than I know myself, while she attempts to make her own character and motives very inexplicable. The assumption is too absurd, however, to be vexed about."

"I suppose no one could make her believe

her intuitions are ever at fault," said Mrs. West. "But what were you saying about religious skepticism. when I came in?" Anna is not an unbeliever, is she?"

"She is somewhat unsettled in her views, lately."

"I thought she was a church-member."

"She is; but I fear she never had much heart in the matter. She certainly hasn't now."

"What an insidious thing this skepticism is," said Mrs. West, musingly. "When I married your uncle, I had never thought of doubting the truth of Christianity, though I was indifferent to its claims; but when I found how completely he discarded the whole system, I gradually imbibed his views. Unbelief formed a plausible reason for my inaction, and I was very willing to put my conscience to sleep in that way; so I finally came to think myself almost as confirmed an unbeliever as he was. I believe that is the secret of half the skepticism in the world. People are not ready to yield to the requirements

of the Gospel, and, to maintain a show of consistency, they question the validity of its claims."

"Do you think so?" Florence had never heard her aunt say so much on the subject, before, and she hardly knew how to answer.

"Yes, I know it. I have been thinking it over a good deal of late, and am convinced that my skepticism, at least, is mere laziness, — or, worse still, a mean, lying subterfuge to cover my laziness. But I have indulged it so long, it will be next to impossible to shake it off, now."

"Dear Aunt, you know there is One to help us, with whom there are no impossibilities."

"Yes; and I mean to seek aid from that source," was the answer.

Florence would much rather have heard her say "I will" or "I do," than "I mean to;" but she felt too timid to make the suggestion, and the subject dropped there.

The year of banishment from school passed slowly and wearily to Florence. It seemed like

so much precious time going to waste. She did not realize that she was, or might be, learning lessons more valuable than those she missed at school. She chafed and fretted at the delay, and could hardly bear to see her schoolmates going back and forth, or to hear them gossip about school matters, when they dropped in to see her. Not that she was envious, but it made her feel more keenly how much she was losing. She was saying something of the kind to Anna, one day, when the latter remarked, almost tauntingly, —

"This is a good time to test your faith, Florence. I thought religion was designed to make us happy under all circumstances."

Florence smiled sadly. "I used to think so, too; but either it is a mistaken idea, or I have not enough to prove its truth."

"I don't believe you are so much better than I am, after all."

"Did I ever claim to be, my dear?"

"Of course not, you dear humility; but I used to think you were. I'm afraid your saintship isn't going to stand the test, however."

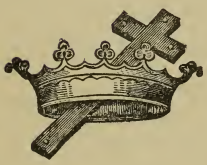
"I don't aspire to saintship, so your sarcasm is both unjust and unkind. However, if this feeling of unrest and impatience is wrong, — as I suppose it is, — I must overcome it. God helping me, *I will.*"

And she did. There was this difference, at least, between her moral nature and Anna's, — when she discovered a fault in herself, she immediately undertook the task of rooting it out. The suggestion of her friend, though conveyed with no very amiable spirit, or laudable motive, was, perhaps, needed, and she accepted it. The struggle which followed was long; but the rest was sweet, when she could say, from a full heart, —

"I worship Thee, sweet Will of God!
And all Thy ways adore;
And every day I live, I long
To love Thee more and more.

"When obstacles and trials seem
Like prison walls to be,
I do the little I can do,
And leave the rest to Thee.

"I have no cares, O blessed Will!
For all my cares are Thine.
I live in triumph, Lord, for Thou
Hast made Thy triumphs, mine."



CHAPTER XIII.

A VISIT TO THE PARSONAGE.

"WHAT new crotchet do you suppose Prof. Stanly has in his head?" said Anna, one evening, as she dropped in for a little chat with Florence.

"I am sure I can't tell. Some new plan for taming you, is it?"

"Not a bit of it! He gave that up as a hopeless task long ago."

"Perhaps he has not given it up so completely as you think. He may take you by a *coup d'état* yet, some day."

"I'd like to see him try it!"

"So would I," said Florence, significantly. "But what is this new 'crotchet,' as you are pleased to call it?"

"Simply this. By way of preparing us girls for our sphere of action, he's going to put us all through a course of instruction in Surveying! I never was so angry in my life! I detest mathematics anyway, but this last infliction is altogether unbearable!"

"O Anna, I should think you would like it. I want to take as complete a course as possible in mathematics as well as in everything else. No flabby 'ladies' course' for me, with all the bone and sinew left out of it. Of course we don't expect to make any practical use of the higher mathematics, but the mental discipline is invaluable."

"Mental fiddlestick! I tell you, I shan't enjoy such studies, and I shan't engage in them either. I defy all the *Profs.* in the world to make me do it."

"Whew! you are getting your indignation up, furiously. Are you dangerous?"

"I should be, if Prof. Stanly were anywhere round. I can't bear him, anyway. He's cross as a bear, lately."

"Come, come, Anna; I can't bear to hear you speak of Prof. Stanly in that way; and I think you must have relieved your mind sufficiently to come up stairs and look at some wax flowers I've been making. I devote myself to fancy work, now that I can't be doing anything better."

Anna bestowed enthusiastic praise on the tasteful bouquet, then went into raptures over a little drawing Florence had just completed; and the two soon fell into a quiet chat of art and literature, of life and character, in which Anna's delicate taste, quick perceptions and nice discrimination charmed her friend, and made her forget the little outburst of passion which she had just witnessed.

Florence was not surprised to hear, soon after

this interview, that Anna had left school; and rumor said that the Principal having offered her the alternative of leaving, or paying more deference to her teachers, she chose the former. Florence felt grieved by her friend's waywardness, but she knew it would be useless to remonstrate, so she accepted, without question, Anna's version of the matter, which was, that she had an opportunity of taking a school early in the spring, and had decided to forego the remainder of her last year of study, so as to begin at once her preparations for leaving home. "And I'm glad to escape that horrid Surveying, too" she said. She soon left the village for the scene of her new duties, and Florence and her friend were separated, except as occasional letters bridged the distance, which was too great for Anna to come home often. Florence missed the companionship sadly; yet she had other friends, who, she felt, were really far better for her than this will-o'-the-wisp, whose meteor-like brilliancy fascinated her, and sometimes led her into paths she had

better not have not trod. Miss Ames, who of late seemed more a friend than a teacher, had much of the flash and sparkle which were so attractive in Anna, but without her lawless caprice and waywardness. She had endeared herself to Florence more and more, and the girl had learned to watch for her coming as for angel visits.

Ellen Ford came often, and always cheered and strengthened her by her own clear, strong sensible views of life, her never failing cheerfulness and energy.

Prof. Stanly called in, now and then, to enquire after the health of his favorite pupil. On one of these occasions, he found her employed with some bright-colored embroidery, playing bo-peep, at intervals, with Alice, and chatting gaily with other members of the family; looking, altogether, so bright and happy, that he asked her if she was not almost glad, she had been relieved from the drudgery of school duties for a year.

"On the contrary," she said, "I shall be the happiest girl in the world when I can take them up again."

"Do you really mean you would give up the rest and freedom and recreation you enjoy now, for the toil of construing Latin and grappling knotty problems?"

Her voice took a graver tone as she answered, "I have found some problems in my daily life this year, harder to solve than any I ever met in mathematics."

"And you are solving them bravely, I see. They are doing you good, my child."

"How do you see it, sir, may I ask?"

"In your eye, your voice, your footstep, your whole air and manner. I am used to reading my pupils, you know," he added as he met her questioning look; then, putting his hand on her head with fatherly freedom, he said in a low, earnest tone, "You have gained much in strength and womanhood and all noble attributes, during this year of trial. God bless you, dear."

"Her eyes filled at this unwonted tenderness, this generous commendation from one whose praise was, to her, above all, and she felt that she should wear as a crown forever, the touch of his hand upon her head.

Florence was daily growing more indispensable to her aunt, and more warmly attached to her and to the simple household duties of which she had the charge. She completely relieved Mrs. West of care in those departments which were assigned to her, and she made herself especially useful by her devotion to little Alice. The child appreciated Florence's care and tenderness, and clung to her almost as lovingly as to her mother; while the latter, knowing how judicious and faithful the young nurse was, intrusted her darling to her care, whenever occasion required; and these occasions, owing to the delicate health of Mrs. West were not unfrequent. As the time approached, which Florence was eagerly anticipating, when she should enter a school where ample advantages were afforded

for completing a thorough course of study, Mrs. West was selfishly dreading it.

"I don't know what I shall do without you, when you are gone," she said, one day, when a nervous headache had rendered her keenly sensitive to the slightest annoyance and no one but Florence could keep Allie quiet or make the household machinery run without friction.

"Dear Aunt I won't leave you till you are well," said Florence.

"Oh yes, you must. I am not quite selfish enough to accept that sacrifice. Go on with your preparations, and, if your health is sufficiently re-established you must begin with the fall term. I shall listen to no other proposition," she said, playfully putting her hand over Florence's mouth as she attempted to speak. I shall miss you, but you must not think, for a moment, that I shall allow you to stay at home on my account."

The first of September came; Florence's wardrobe was ready, her boarding-place engaged and scholarship secured; in a few days more, the hope

so long deferred was to be fulfilled. She was awaiting the day of her departure with eager expectancy although it would remove her for a while from the pleasant home she had learned to love only less than that of her early childhood.

Her friends were dropping in to see her and bid her good-by, and Mrs. Richards had invited her to take tea with her the day before she started. This invitation she was happy to accept. Mr. and Mrs. Richards were the most genial and companionable of friends, while the sunny atmosphere of heavenward love and trust pervading the parsonage formed a delightful contrast to the chilling one of unbelief, without which, her uncle's home would have been the pleasantest place in all the world.

Before she started for this visit, she gathered up the books she had borrowed at different times from her pastor's library, as helps in her theological investigations, and was surprised to find them so numerous. Laden with them she approached the parsonage gate, when Mr. Richards met her

and, taking the books himself, said smilingly, —

"You would be literally overpowered with the weight of arguments if you had to carry these much farther."

She smiled in answer. "I think Uncle Percy's skepticism must have been overpowered by them long ago, if he had not so persistently 'stood from under.'"

"You did not induce him to read many of them, then?"

"No sir; very few. He would take up one now and then, but he soon laid it aside for a new magazine or some of his favorite authors."

"Yet I suppose he would be very angry if any one should intimate that he loves darkness rather than light.'"

"I suppose so." They were in the house now, and Mrs. Richards greeted Florence warmly, and led the way to the parlor. The conversation turned on trivial subjects for a while, when Mrs. Richards asked, —

"You were speaking of your uncle's religious

views, were you not, as you came in? Does he still discard Revelation entirely?"

"Yes, he seems to grow more and more determined in his opposition," said Florence, sadly.

"Possibly this determined resistance may be a sort of bravado," suggested Mr. Richards. "It is often the case that people who are nearing an unwelcome conclusion seem fully steeled against it."

"At least we need not give him up," said Mrs. Richards. "God can touch his heart, and that is our only hope in any case."

"Yes it's more heart-work than head-work," said her husband. "Deny it never so stoutly, it is certainly true that unbelief, in nine cases out of ten, springs from unwillingness to receive and obey the Gospel, either because there is something distasteful in its doctrines and duties, or because intellectual pride refuses to admit a need of God's revelation. I think that any one who carefully ponders the evidences of Christianity, with a sincere desire to know the truth, can hardly fail to be convinced. If he examined the matter with even

as much interest as he would the validity of the title-deed to an earthly inheritance, it need not be said of him, in reference to heavenly possessions, that 'he could not enter in because of unbelief.'"

"Do you think, then, there is no such thing as honest skepticism?" asked Florence.

"No; I would hardly go so far as that. Education and surrounding influences may make one a doubter without fault of his own. But I do not think God will leave such an one in darkness, if he looks to him for light."

"If any one lives and dies an unbeliever, it is his own fault then?"

"I think so, assuredly, in this land where the light of the Gospel shines so brightly. The command to believe was not given without sufficient evidence to make belief possible; nor can it be disregarded without incurring guilt and danger."

"Uncle considers that command 'Believe,' with reward and penalty attached, a very arbitrary, unreasonable enactment. He thinks we are not responsible for our opinions."

"All the analogies of human society are against him, then. We do, ourselves, hold people responsible for their beiief, and act accordingly. I once had a mean, lying report circulated against me, and I could not help feeling far otherwise than friendly toward those of my neighbors who believed it. I suppose Mr. West will admit that many of the rebels against our government believe their cause to be just, but that does not make him very lenient toward them."

Florence laughed, and Mr. Richards continued, —

"A man's belief is so inseparable from his actions and character, that if he is not responsiple for the one we can hardly judge him for the other. If a mere intellectual assent to the doctrines of Christianity were made the condition of salvation, there might be some reason in Mr. West's cavil; but the faith enjoined is one that permeates the whole nature, purifying the heart, and molding the life. To my mind, 'Believe

and be saved,' is not so much a command as a prescription. It is the only remedy which the infinite wisdom of God could provide for our diseased natures, the only thing that can raise and purify and make us meet for heaven — this faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is as if a mother said to her sick child, 'Take this medicine and you shall live; refuse it and you must die.'"

Florence was deeply impressed by this view of the subject, and answered thoughtfully, "How full of guilt and folly, disobedience to such a loving command must be!"

"Yes, there's a strange infatuation holding us all, else we could not be so indifferent to the momentous issues which hang on this brief life of ours. I often wonder what the angels think of us."

"We know what One greater than the angels thought of us, when he wept over Jerusalem," said Mrs. Richards, softly.

"And that grieving tenderness and infinite

forbearance should be our model," said the minister. "It always pains me to hear anything like invective or denunciation used in dealing with the rejecters of the Gospel. I was a skeptic once myself, and know that such a course would only have driven me farther and farther from the truth."

"You a skeptic?" said Florence in surprise.

"Yes, when I went out from home into the world and began to hear objections such as your uncle urges, they staggered me. And then, I was just entering manhood, and thought it a little 'smart' to throw off the restraints of religion, as many young men think now-a-days. Poor, pitiful, paltry conceit! Thank God! He showed me the folly of it."

"Who is free from it, I wonder?" exclaimed Florence. "Mr. Richards, is it not growing more and more prevalent? Have not our enemies some reason to prophesy our overthrow?"

"Oh, no! You take too gloomy a view of the case. There have been far darker periods than

this in the church's history. Indeed, I do not consider the present a dark one at all. The spirit of inquiry and investigation which is now so rife, would fain demolish everything old, merely because it is old, I believe. But, though it stands in such a menacing attitude towards the faith we cherish, I think the final result will be the establishing of that faith on firmer foundations than ever. Every new attempt to overturn this religion only proves, by its failure, how firm is the rock on which it is founded. We need not fear; though we may be sure our enemies will leave no means untried to work our ruin."

"'The noise of them that hate thee ascendeth more and more,'" said Florence musingly.

"'Ascendeth continually,' would be a better translation," said the minister, "and makes the text a trifle less discouraging. By the way, suppose I preach from that text next Sabbath."

"I shall not be here to listen then. Please leave it till I come home," pleaded Florence.

"I'm afraid the subject will be cold, by that time, or rather, my thoughts on it. And besides, you will come home so learned and so accustomed to eloquent preaching, I shall hardly hope to interest you any more."

"Great danger of that," laughed Florence — then said earnestly, "I can never thank you enough for all you have taught and helped me."

"I am more than repaid by your kind attention, your willingness to receive the truth in the love of it," said the pastor. "You have helped me, too, in many ways. And now, what are you going to do for the cause up there? If you can set such a ball rolling as the little prayer-meeting you school-girls started here proved to be, it will be better than all the intellectual triumphs you can win; though I would not undervalue those. Be as ambitious a student as you will; only remember the injunction, 'Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.'"

Tea was here announced, and, before it was over, a messenger came in haste for Florence, saying that her aunt was violently ill.

CHAPTER XIV.

DARK DAYS.

FLORENCE hastened home, and found the household in much confusion and alarm. Through the carelessness of the servant a portion of the house had caught fire, which Mrs. West discovered in time to save the building by the most vigorous exertions; but these so overtaxed her slight strength, that before the fire was fairly extinguished, she found herself prostrated by a sudden attack of hemorrhage of the lungs. Mr. West had arrived before Florence, and was doing what he could for his wife; Fanny was busy extinguishing the remains of the fire; the servant-girl

was running frantically to and fro, endeavoring to assist in many ways, but only succeeding in adding to the general confusion; while poor little Alice stood in a corner, speechless and motionless with fright. Florence went immediately to her, and, as she took her up, the tremor of the little frame and the convulsive clasp of the arms about her neck told, more forcibly than screams could have done, how much the child was terrified by this unusual scene. She carried her to another room, and tried to soothe her and divert her attention; but, though the muscles relaxed, and the delicate face lost some of its pallor, the little one could not forget the cause of her fright, and tried, in baby accents to tell "Tousin Forrie" about it. The hurt inflicted on "poor mamma" seemed to be the uppermost thought, and she pleaded to go and see her, till Florence, unable to quiet her in any other way, and anxious herself to know how her aunt was, went softly to the room whither she had been carried, and where she now lay exhausted among

the pillows, looking about as white as they. The little one insisted on kissing her, and patting the pale face for a minute, then quietly returned to her seat in Florence's lap.

The physician had come, and was trying to allay Mr. West's fears. "It was a severe attack," he acknowledged; "but it would not last long. Indeed, the worst was over now, and if she were careful it would not be repeated." Leaving a few simple remedies, and enjoining rest and quiet as the best of medicines, he was gone.

Mrs. West was able to sit up, the next morning, and insisted that Florence should not delay her departure; but the latter would not listen to the suggestion. She must stay at home a few days, at least, and see her aunt fully recovered.

Mr. Richards and his wife called during the day, to see how Mrs. West was; and, glad to find her so much better, extended their call and fell into a pleasant chat, in course of which Mr. Richards remarked to Florence, —

"This little change in the programme is

rather unfortunate for you. I wonder if it isn't a stratagem of your aunt, to keep you with her a little longer."

Mrs. West smiled, and Florence answered, "On the contrary she still seemed anxious to be rid of me, and tried to hurry me off this morning, as if nothing had happened. But of course I wouldn't go, after finding she couldn't even take care of herself while I made an afternoon's visit."

"Well, by this arrangement, you will be enabled to hear the sermon I was going to preach for you. That will be ample compensation for your disappointment, no doubt."

"I wish you would preach me a sermon," said Mrs. West, seriously, — "one that would bring me back to my childhood's faith."

His light, bantering tone changed instantly to one of heartfelt earnestness as he answered, "From my inmost soul, I wish I might, Mrs. West. How came you to wander from that faith? If you can find by what path you strayed, it may help you to retrace your steps."

"It is the old story," she said, sadly. "I 'knew my duty, but I did it not;' and, willing to find an excuse for my conduct, I began to question the validity of the Gospel claims, and now, the habit of unbelief is so confirmed I cannot shake it off."

"*Cannot*, Mrs. West?"

"At least, it requires a stronger effort of the will than I feel capable of making, now."

"Yet the time may never come when you will feel more like it, or as much. 'Now is the accepted time.' *Dont wait*," he pleaded, as he saw the look of irresolution on her pale face. "The Savior himself will help you. Let us look to him now." And they all knelt in prayer. Rising, he took her hand to say good-by, adding with tender earnestness, "You will pray for yourself, won't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Richards, *I will*," she said, in a voice from which all the indecision had vanished, and whose clear, ringing tones filled the pastor's heart with joy. "I will pray, and I will believe.

I *do* believe," she added, a sudden light irradiating her countenance.

"Thank God for that!" said Mr. Richards fervently. 'Cling to the Crucified' — close — close," — and, too much moved to say more, he pressed her hand, and silently withdrew.

When Mr. West came in, he saw the seal of peace on his wife's brow, and wondered whence proceeded that strange, bright calm, which, familiar as he was with all the changes of the beloved countenance, he had never witnessed there before.

"How do you find yourself?" he said carelessly, but there was something in his tone that counteracted the lightness of the words, and he bent and kissed her forehead almost reverently.

"Well, quite well," she answered, her voice lingering on the words as if she loved to speak them. They had a new, sweet meaning to her.

"Well, so soon? There must be some miraculous power in Dr. Morton's medicines.

She was not quite ready yet to tell him of the

cure the Great Physician had wrought for her, so she merely insisted, —

"Really, I do feel quite well, only a little weak and tired."

"See that you keep well, in future, my darling. If the house takes fire again, let it burn down, only so that you get yourself and Allie out of it."

Still Mrs. West's recovery was slow. She did not gain much in strength or appetite, and sometimes a bright red spot burned on her cheek — that "rose whose root is death," — while a dry cough troubled her, which it pained Mr. West inexpressibly to hear. Florence shared her uncle's apprehensions as if by intuition, for he never spoke them, and, in her solicitude for the dear aunt who was a second mother to her — knowing, too, how illy her services could be spared — she gradually relinquished the idea of entering college that year. It was hard; "hope long deferred maketh the heart sick," and hers sometimes half rebelled

against the chain of untoward circumstances which kept her so long from her school; while it swelled with grief at the thought of watching the slow decline of one whom she loved so fervently. Yet she strove to conquer all wrong emotions, to walk steadfastly in the narrow path of duty, and receive as from a Father's hand, every bitter cup she was called to drink. Her aunt, seeing the quiet, firm determination with which the change in her plans was made, ceased to remonstrate, and accepted gratefully the blessing of her niece's tender care. She was constantly with her aunt, when not engaged in household duties, or in the care of Allie; she read to her, and talked with her, making the hours of pain and weariness drag less heavily; she kept the room tastefully arranged and bright with flowers and soft sunshine; while her skillful hands prepared the thousand little comforts and luxuries which relieve the sufferings of an invalid. As the the slow, insidious disease advanced, it was mainly through her efficiency and devotion, that her uncle was enabled to

attend to his professional duties at all, and that the invalid herself was saved from many cares and annoyances which must have aggravated her disease.

Florence kept up strength and courage bravely; but there were times when, worn with care and watching, the old nervous depression of spirits would come upon her with more overwhelming force than ever. Everything around appeared dark and forbidding, and when she looked up for light, even the face of God seemed hidden, and the heavens were brass to her importunate pleadings. Then she would wonder if she ever possessed any true faith in God, and what the secret sin could be, which separated her from the divine and gracious Friend who used to seem so sweetly near. She perplexed herself with these questions till they finally distressed her more than did the painful emotions which gave rise to them. At last, she took them to her pastor for solution. He listened kindly, and answered, —

"I do not think you ought to reproach your-

self for this depression, which may be only the result of physical causes. God tries his children in many ways, and, sometimes, seems even to hide his own face from them, to see whether they are willing to walk by faith, instead of sight. Can you not trust him in the darkness, as well as in the light?"

"Oh, yes! 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.'"

"That is right. Cling to that, and all will be well. Rest assured, he will *not* slay you."

"But, Mr. Richards, if I could be sure it was no fault of mine which has brought this darkness upon me, — no secret sin, which I may be unconsciously cherishing."

"If, after candid, prayerful searching of your own heart, you find none, do not perplex yourself further. Look to God for wisdom and direction, then do the best you can; it is all he requires."

Still she was hardly satisfied.

"I always supposed the Christian religion was

designed to fill the heart of its possessor with light and joy," she said. "I want to be able, when recommending it to others, to speak of its blessedness from my own experience."

"Is it not a blessed experience to be able to say, as you said just now, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him?' To my mind, that is the very triumph of faith. My advice to you is that you think as little as possible about such things, now. You are worn with fatigue, depressed by care and anxiety; when you have a chance to rest, and to recruit your physical system, these questions will settle themselves."

"Is religious experience, then, a mere mood of mind, dependent on health and outward circumstances?" Florence spoke bitterly, for her, and her persistence seemed bordering on obstinacy; but the pastor answered, kindly, —

"By no means, my girl! Could the mere buoyancy of health ever have given you the joy you have felt in communion with the Savior? Did it, before you learned how to love him?"

"Oh, no; that joy is different from anything else, sweeter than anything else."

"And your present depression has not robbed you of faith and love, only of buoyant joyfulness. No! religious feeling is not dependent on the state of the physical system, though it is necessarily somewhat influenced thereby. It is our misfortune that, 'while this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly shut us in,' our whole mental and spiritual life is, more or less, crucified by it. Wait patiently, Florence; we shall be free from it, some day."

"I hope so; but I don't like to be quite so much under its dominion, now," she answered.

"Anyway, nothing will be gained by chafing against the fetters too impatiently. That's the way to make them hurt the more, you know."

By which wholesome suggestion Florence was not a little benefitted.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

IN the quiet room of the invalid, Florence found many helps and compensations. Such a sweet, pure atmosphere of love and trust pervaded it, that even the brooding thought of death seemed only a bright cloud over-shadowing. Mrs. West had given up the hope of recovery, she knew she was going down into the dark valley, but she did not fear, for the Lord was with her. Only one thought gave her pain; it was that her husband did not share this precious faith; that her darling child might be left to grow up to womanhood without its holy influence.

"Dear Percy," she pleaded, "promise me that you will not teach Alice to despise the religion of Jesus. I could not bear the thought of leaving her to grow up in unbelief; I should pray that she might die with me."

"Don't talk of dying, Mary!" he exclaimed passionately. "You are not going to die; what could I do without you?"

She smiled sadly. "If you could only realize where I am going, Percy, and where you may follow me, if you will only rid yourself of this demon of unbelief, and accept the proffered inheritance! But you have not given me the promise I asked. You must promise, Percy! I cannot rest until you do!

"You know I have no desire to influence any one in the choice of religious faith. I shall wish Alice's mind to remain unbiased through childhood, that, as she grows up, she may think and judge for herself."

Mrs. West felt the sophistry of this; realized that if children were to grow up with minds

"unbiased" on questions of right and wrong, of truth and error, there was little use of pretending to train them at all. Though in this case, she felt the negative training would be better than the positive wrong influence she had feared he would exert; yet she still insisted,—

"Do not even let her know that you doubt Christianity, will you?"

"That will be a hard matter, Mary, addicted as I am to expressing my opinions pretty freely on all subjects. However, for your sake, I will try."

"And, Percy,—if you could only receive this blessed faith into your own heart! Won't you try? Go over with the investigation and see if you may not have been misled!"

"My dear, I haven't time. You know how I fared when I began reading the Bible with Florence, two or three years ago."

"Dear husband, what is time for?"

"I don't know," he answered dryly. "Mine seems to be for getting my clients out of scrapes."

"The day is coming when you will need an Advocate, yourself," she said. "Oh do not, *do not* barter the momentous interests of eternity for the paltry ones of time."

"Mary, darling, you are fatiguing yourself too much. Don't be distressed about me. I am honest in my belief, and your God is merciful."

"Yes, to those who do not slight his mercy. But to those who do, his very love becomes a 'consuming fire.'"

"I wish I could think and feel as you would have me. I will try to, for your sake. And now you must try to rest, for mine," — and passing his hand gently over her brow, he soon soothed her into a quiet slumber.

Then he leaned his head upon the bedside, and gave way to the surging thoughts and emotions within. Must she leave him? This beautiful being who had been the embodiment of all his youthful dreams of love and loveliness, this sweetest woman who had walked beside him through years of storm and sunshine, irradiating

the darkness of the storm, and making the sunshine still more bright and glad and golden. Could he miss her from his side, and still go on with the daily routine of life, and call it living? Who was the "grim monster" that dared to sunder a tie so sweet and strong and holy? Whence came he, and whither would he bear this treasure?

How long the stricken man had sat there, alone with his bitter thoughts, he knew not, when his sister entered the room noiselessly, and, laying a hand upon his shoulder, whispered to him to come to tea. He shook off the gentle touch, and answered, almost fiercely, —

"I can't go. Leave me alone. Have something ready for Mary, when she awakens."

Fanny was angry, for a moment, at the seeming rudeness; but the feeling was soon lost in deep sympathy for her brother's evident suffering. She knew it was useless to try to rouse, or soothe, or comfort him, when in this mood, so she left the apartment noiselessly as she came. Mr.

West rose and walked the floor. The quiet of the room stifled him, and the peaceful countenance of the sleeper seemed to mock his passionate questionings. He went out into the night, — a wild, stormy, winter's night it was, but it harmonized with his mood, and he felt that the raging elements were his brothers. The wind, now loud and tempestuous, now dying away to a weary moan, the dark, flying clouds that swept across the moon, the blinding gusts of frozen rain, and the roar of the wind-swept forest, not far off, cast their wild, weird spell about him, and almost hushed the raging of the tempest within, as he walked on and on, with hurried strides, to distance the demon of despair that seemed dogging his footsteps. Tired out at length, and fearing, too, that Mary might wake and call him, he retraced his steps, and entered his wife's apartment with less bitterness in his heart than when he left it. Fanny was there, and persuaded her brother to go into another room and try to rest, while she watched by the invalid. He did

so; and, exhausted nature claiming her dues, he slept heavily till morning.

Fanny arranged the room for the night, putting the medicines and cordials in convenient places, and shaded the lamp to the soft light her sister liked; then, as she was still sleeping, the watcher threw herself on a sofa near the bed, where she knew the least sound would waken her, thinking she would sleep awhile, herself. But sleep did not come at her bidding. The storm without was growing wilder, and, as she listened to its fury, it seemed to her excited fancy that the demon of death was abroad upon the blast, wailing about the mansion where he knew his victim lay, but to which he could not yet find admittance. She shuddered. What if he should come now? What a night for a human soul to go forth into the darkness, alone with the grim messenger. Yet multitudes were going, even now. The pathway was always thronged. That dark, fearful journey, — what was it, and whither did it lead? Ah! whither? The old, old ques-

tion, the question of all the ages. The world was full of its pathos, — and who had ever come back from the shadowy realms to answer it? Who, but Jesus of Nazareth, — and could she believe the record of his death and resurrection? Oh, if she only could! If Mary's sweet, unwavering trust were hers. But it was all so strange and mysterious, — she had always thought it must be a myth — yet what if it be true? Then what other truth could there be in the world, that would not either lose itself in this, or sink into utter insignificance beside it? What treasure so sweet and precious, so well worth living for, — ay, dying for, as thousands had died, and counted it all joy! If it be true, she must know it, and, knowing, she must receive it into her heart, to be, henceforth, the all-controlling principle, the life of life.

Her readings and investigations of late had thrown down many of the strongholds of her unbelief; the Bible was acquiring a new interest for her, as she understood it better, and learned

more of the proofs of its Divine authority. Now, with the earnest cry upon her lips, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief," she took her sister's Bible from the table near by, and was soon lost in its perusal. Turning leaf after leaf, and reading with special care the passages Mary had marked, she was aware of nothing else till the clock struck the hour of midnight. Looking up, she saw that her sister had awakened, and was regarding her with a look of tender interest.

"Read aloud, please," she said, as Fanny's eye met hers.

She read softly a passage, to which an index, delicately traced in pencil, pointed, —

"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Mary listened, as in a trance of quiet happiness, till the beautiful chapter was finished, then asked, earnestly, —

"Can't you believe this, Fanny?"

"I wish I could heartily say 'yes,'" she replied, with emotion. "My doubts are gradually melting away. I think there will be clear air and sunshine after a while; but there is a good deal of darkness round me now."

"There shall be light at eventide," murmured Mary, and was soon asleep again.

Fanny bent over her, and listened to the regular breathing. She had not known her to rest so well for many a night, and a sudden hope sprang up in her heart that the disease was relaxing its hold, and they might keep the loved one with them yet.

She was certainly better the next day, and for several days after; and Mr. West declared that if they could keep her from relapse till warm weather came, a sea-voyage, and a short residence beneath the sunny skies of Italy would certainly complete her cure. It must be so, he felt, — it *should* be, — he could not have it otherwise.

But she was not deceived. One day, as he sat by her side, painting bright pictures of their

future in the land of art and song and love, she said, with only a touch of sadness in her tone, —

"Dear Percy, it cannot be. I am going to a brighter land than even Italy. Do believe it, learn to think calmly of it before I go, and find the path by which you may follow me thither."

His only reply was a tender caress.

"And Allie must come, too," she continued. "I charge you, Percy, — nay, I entreat you, not to cheat that precious child of heaven."

Still he did not answer.

"Florence, my child, you will teach her the way, and you won't forget to pray for him when I am gone. Bring them both to me, my daughter, — for you are my daughter — Allie herself is scarcely dearer. God bless you for your tender love and care."

Florence only replied with tears and kisses.

"Where mamma doin?" said the child, whom Mr. West held on his knee, but did not suppose she was observing the conversation. He pressed her in a close embrace, and answered, —

"Mamma isn't going anywhere, now, darling. Maybe, by and by, we'll send her off somewhere to make her well."

"Poor mamma," she said, in the compassionate, grieving tone with which she often spoke of her mother, since her illness. "Dood mamma,"—climbing upon the bed and covering the pale face with kisses, then nestling down beside her.

It was spring-time, now; but the soft, bright sunshine and warm breezes which were wakening the earth anew to life and beauty, did not bring strength or healing to the sufferer. Day by day "the ties of earth were loosening," and one sweet May evening, with the setting sun irradiating her pale brow like a light from heaven, with the odor of early roses stealing through the open window, and the melody of bird-songs floating on the charmed air, they gathered around to hear her last words of love and blessing. Retiring, one by one, they left the stricken husband alone with her, to watch the eyelids close softly over the blue eyes, which had been his dream of heaven, to hear

the breath come fainter and fainter, and then cease, and know that the beautiful soul was gone!

CHAPTER XVI.

WITHOUT HOPE.

"Alas for him who never sees
The stars shine through his cypress trees!
Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
Nor looks to see the breaking day
Over the mournful marbles play."

IT was touching to witness the anguish that bowed the strong man down to the very darkness of death. It did not vent itself in words or tears; but there was such a look of settled, inconsolable grief in his countenance, as he wandered about the rooms, and to and from his office, in such a dreary, aimless way, that his sister and Florence almost

forgot their own sorrow in solicitude for his deeper anguish.

Little Alice was not allowed to see the coffin or the burial. Her father felt so utterly incompetent to explain the dread mystery of death, or to throw any light on the darkness of the tomb, that he determined to keep from her, as long as possible, the knowledge that such things were in the world. On the day her mother died, he sent her away from home, consigning her to the care of a faithful friend, and she did not return till the last sad rites were over. When she asked to see mamma, Mr. West took her in his arms, and told her, tenderly, that "Mamma had gone a great way off, and might not come back again for a long time. Would Allie be a dear, good, little girl, and not cry for her? She would break papa's heart if she cried."

"Mamma do off to get well?" asked the little one.

"Yes, darling." Ah, if he could only have believed the truth he told her! If he could

have felt that she was safe in that country where the inhabitants never say "I am sick!"

"I wis s'e'd be well, now. Allie wants her come home."

Mr. West groaned. How could he ever teach her, or teach himself, to endure this loss, — to cover up the aching void? He could say no more, but, placing the child in his sister's arms, he left the room.

There had been no sermon preached at the time of the burial; but on the following Sabbath, Mr. Richards gave a beautiful and touching memorial of her whom God had called away from them, taking as his text the words, "He giveth his beloved sleep," and closing the service with that sweetest hymn of Mrs. Browning's: —

"'Sleep soft, beloved,' we sometimes say,
But have no tune to charm away
Sad dreams, that through the eyelids creep.
But never doleful dream again
Shall break the happy slumber, when
'He giveth *His* beloved sleep.'

"His dews drop mutely on the hill,
His cloud above it saileth still,
Though on its slope, men sow and reap.
More softly than the dew is shed,
Or cloud is floated overhead,
'He giveth His beloved sleep."

"And friends, dear friends,—when it shall be
That this low breath is gone from me,
And round my bier ye come to weep,
Let one, most loving of you all,
Say, 'Not a tear must o'er her fall—
He giveth His beloved sleep.'"

"Dear Mr. West, can't you look up?" said the minister, clasping his hand, as he left the church.

"It's all dark, wherever I look," he answered, in a choking voice, and walked hurriedly away.

"How beautiful the service was!" said Florence to her aunt, as they followed him at a little distance.

"Beautiful, exceedingly! I wonder if I shall ever learn to look on death like that,—ever be able to meet it as she met it."

The days came and went to the bereaved household, as other days had come and gone: but Mr. West was not brave enough to stand up and face them with undaunted courage, not strong enough to bear their wonted burdens. He felt a restless longing to go somewhere,—anywhere, away from the thousand tokens that recalled his loss to mind, away from the rooms in which she had lived, the paths she had trodden by his side; away from the very atmosphere which she had breathed, and that seemed to stifle him now, because it gave no life to her. The place which had been his home and hers, could never be home to him again; so he offered it for sale, and determined to exile himself from his native land, fondly hoping to lose himself and his great grief amid the grandeur of the ocean, the wild magnificence of old-world mountains, or the babel noise of thronged cities; then find some quiet nook, where, alone with his darling child, he might make another home, unhaunted by grief-laden memories, where he might be, if

not happy, at least serene and cheerful, so that his life might not overshadow hers.

Florence should accompany him as far as Paris, where her brother would probably claim her as his peculiar charge.

Fanny was tired of teaching, and had determined, at the close of the present term, to go to her home in a distant state.

So the household would be completely dismembered.

One item of business was to be connected with Mr. West's tour. At Mrs. Eldrege's solicitation, he was to bring to light, if possible, the frauds of her nephew, and attempt the recovery of her property. This done, his sole aim would be to find, somewhere amid the glories of nature or of art, forgetfulness of his sorrows.

Ah, fruitless effort! He found it so.

CHAPTER XVII.

LEAVING HOME.

THE short, intervening time of preparation was, to the whole household, one of hurry and confusion, of tender memories and dim out-lookings to the future, of many commonplace greetings and good-byes, and many more unspoken benedictions and farewells.

"So you are really going to Paris to live, Florence. How I envy you!" The speaker was Anna Eldrege, who, having survived her first year of teaching, was spending her vacation at home.

Florence smiled, but not very brightly, Anna thought, as she rattled on. "I don't believe you half appreciate your privileges, or care one straw for the brilliant prospect before you. But pardon me; I ought to remember you have no heart for gayeties, now."

"I do not think I ever cared much for mere gayety," said Florence, "or ever shall. The showy, brilliant side of city life never had much attractiveness for me. I am not fitted to enjoy it, even if I thought it worth my while."

"Oh well, my dear old sensible! There is plenty of stronger meat for you. Lectures, theatres, operas, art-galleries, etc."

"Some of these are good; of others, I think I shall not avail myself."

"You are utterly incorrigible! May I ask what is your ideal of an earthly paradise?"

"I am not sure that I have formed one, or wish to form one. You remember Mahomet's reason for not entering Damascus,—'Man can have but one paradise; let not mine be here?'"

"I believe I will take mine when I can get it, and make sure."

"O Anna, you don't mean 'let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die?' But as to your question, I shall fully appreciate that part of my 'good fortune' which includes the oppotunity for travel and culture, and, better still, of being with my brother. As for employment, I shall enter school again, as soon as I find one suitable."

"What's the use? You've been to school enough, already."

"Enough! I've only begun!"

"What will you do with all your knowledge, when you have got it?"

"I don't know; probably, I shall teach. Anyway, education is not a bad thing to have, and I shall be better employed in gaining it, than in dressing and making fashionable calls."

"I tell you, if I had your chance, I would teach you how to find the wine of life in those shining goblets you disdain."

"You might find the lees bitter, when you had drained the cup."

"Possibly! But even bitterness would be preferable to the insipidity of this hum-drum life!" and she tapped her foot upon the carpet, restlessly.

"Dear Anna," said her friend, "I cannot bear to hear you speak so of life, that great, good gift of God. Surely we may all make of it something grand and noble, if we will."

"Don't talk to me! I can see by your eyes that you are more tired of it this moment, than I am, and with all these pleasant prospects before you, too. Why is it, darling? Won't you tell me?"

"I feel sad at leaving this place, with its sacred memories; I miss the dear one gone; I am a little apprehensive of the untried future; that is all."

"All?"

"Yes, I believe so. Come up stairs, and see my outfit. It is not mourning, though, of course, I felt like choosing sober colors and simple styles. But uncle wishes no badge of grief to be worn.

He has a kind of scorn for the sorrow that flaunts itself in outward signs, and I believe he is half right, — though it is more natural to follow a false custom than to protest against it."

In another room, little Alice was "trying on" her new suit. Her father looked on in loving admiration, while the little one danced about in high glee, and surveyed herself in the mirror, with various approving nods and frank expressions of admiration for her diminutive ladyship, making a stout resistance when Aunt Fanny proposed removing the "pomps and vanities" in which her truly feminine heart delighted.

"Ah, little vanity!" said her father, catching her up, and giving her a perilous toss into the air, then shaking and tumbling her about, till her merry laugh rang out, — "you're just like all the rest of 'em. Never mind! You shall have the pretty things on again, some day, and take a long, long ride with papa. So be a good girl and let auntie take them off, now."

The child was reconciled, and went to Aunt

Fanny with a bound; but, while dressing, a graver thought came across her, and, climbing on her father's knee, she said, softly, —

"Papa, is we doin after mamma, — b'ing her home?"

He folded her close in his arms, and did not answer; but, going out into the garden, succeeded in diverting her attention.

While these preparations were going busily on, there came sad tidings, which hastened the departure, and fell with crushing weight upon poor Florence. Her brother was lying at the point of death; not stricken by the hand of God, — then she could have borne it; but suffering from injuries received in a disgraceful brawl, a quarrel which arose between himself and Harry Burton, over a gaming table. These were the plain facts of the case which Mr. West, who learned them first, would fain have concealed from Florence, had she not insisted upon knowing all. When he had told her, he sat down beside her, and said, —

"My dear girl, I wish I could comfort you, but I fear I shall add to your pain, instead. I have things to say which I have left unsaid too long. If I seem unfeeling, will you try to think I have your good at heart, — yours and Charley's?"

"Yes, I will try," she said, not very heartily.

Mr. West bit his lip, and continued, —

"You remember, probably, what I said, some time ago, when you were troubling yourself about his Sabbath-breaking, etc., — about the comparative sinfulness of those things."

Florence remembered very well; but she did not answer, save by a gesture of assent.

"I thought it useless to say any more at that time," he continued. "Perhaps, I had better not have said so much. But now that you are going to him, I must express my opinion that the strictness of his Puritan education is, in part, responsible for this rebound to the opposite extreme of license. I must warn you to rid yourself of these notions, which must appear to him

mere superstitions, and may destroy the influence you might exert in more important matters."

"I don't know what you mean by 'superstitious notions' and 'more important matters,'" said Florence, firmly. "I think all the commands of God are equally binding, and I am sure I should gain no influence over a person of Charley's temperament, by a compromise of principle. I should only lose his respect, as well as my own."

"I do not ask you to compromise your principles," said Mr. West; "but, as you have asked me, to re-consider them. I did not think I should ever try to shake your faith, but I vow," he said, rising with an impatient gesture, "it makes my blood tingle to see a soul and intellect like yours bowing to such a yoke, and trying to fix it on other necks. Shake it off, Florence! Accept a tangible and rational religion, for your own sake, and for the sake of those you would influence."

"Uncle Percy, that will do, I think!" said Florence, who had also risen, and now stood

confronting him, with face pale to the lips, but steadfast, still. "Do not imagine that either your flattery or your sophistry can move me. When I find a more 'rational' religion than that of the Lord Jesus Christ, there will be time enough to talk of accepting it. Of one thing I am sure, *you* have nothing better to offer me!"

Mr. West's laugh jarred painfully on Florence's excited nerves, as he said, lightly, —

"Well, if I have not accomplished my object, it is worth something to see you wrought up to this 'fine phrensy.' And now, for one last test of your belief. I suppose, that for these youthful follies, you relentlessly hand your brother over to eternal punishment."

It was cruel, but he seemed utterly pitiless, that day, and Florence nerved herself to bear it, answering, with forced calmness, —

"If he persist in disregarding well-known principles of right and wrong, I know not how I could, if I would, avert the sentence of eternal justice."

"And can you contemplate his doom with equanimity, and expect to be happy in heaven, while he is suffering the torments of the lost?"

"I do not contemplate this end for him, Uncle Percy. That early education, of whose 'Puritan strictness' you complain, the mother's prayers which stand, a wall of fire, between him and harm, will not be wasted, I am sure, though these alone cannot save him; but I believe he will yet be won back to the path of purity and safety, and my life shall be devoted to this effort, while my prayers besiege heaven to spare his life, and surround him with all sacred influences till he repent. If, when everything has been done that his friends can do, when heaven itself has exhausted its resources to save him, he *will not* have life, I must leave him in the hands of a God of justice, as well as of mercy."

"You are very cool and philosophical about it."

Ah! he did not see the surging tide of anguish in her heart, or he could not have said that.

"It is a terrible thing, I know; but sin is still

more terrible, and the God of purity must manifest his reprobation of it forever and ever. I do not see how, in the nature of things, it can be otherwise. He uses every means his love and mercy can devise, to save us from our sin; but if we will not be rescued from it, we must perish with it."

"But why is it only in this life that mercy is exercised? If there is another life, why is no place for repentance given there?"

"There is no place for repentance, here, to one who has resistsd all good influences, and become hardened against them. I believe there are multitudes all around us, whose doom is sealed as truly as if they were in another world; who have had life and death, blessing and cursing, set before them, who have chosen the latter, and have been left to their choice."

"What of those who have had no good influences?"

"If there are any such, I do not know. Probably, as some one has said of the heathen, we

shall either find them in heaven, or find some good reason why they are not there. But we were speaking of those who have the light. I do not think any one who has slighted God's offers of mercy here, would accept them in another world, were the opportunity granted."

"Are you sure that is the orthodox view?" he said, quizzingly.

"It is, to my mind, the right view. Excuse me, Uncle; I am in no mood for joking." And she left the room, glad to end the painful interview.

Alone in her own room, the pent-up tide of emotion gave way, and Florence wept long and bitterly. Not alone for the sad tidings she had received, but alas!—it would seem her uncle might have spared her this added pang,—from the painful questionings awakened in her mind as to what course she should pursue in ministering to her brother's spiritual and moral needs, which she now saw so plainly. Save him by giving up the faith that was her salvation? A

strange paradox, truly; yet, as she pondered it, many a subtle suggestion came to her mind. It was the severest ordeal her faith had yet passed through. Would it come forth untarnished, — gold, tried in the fire?

Aunt Fanny tapped at the door. Florence admitted her gladly, for solitude and bitter thoughts were becoming unendurable, and no one knew better than Fanny West how to put these unpleasant visitors to flight. Always genial and companionable, there was, of late, an added charm, which all around her felt, without analyzing. Florence, especially, had observed that, without any loss of vivacity, there was an unwonted gentleness in her manner, and a quiet, happy light in her countenance, when at rest; she was less hasty in her judgments, more warm and loving and self-forgetful, and the flashes of anger were very rare. She was growing like Aunt Mary, Florence thought, and loved her more than ever.

"You are missing this glorious sunset, Floy,"

she said, as she entered the room. "Come to my window, where you can see it better." They crossed the hall together. "There, isn't that magnificent?"

"Beautiful as a dream of heaven," said Florence.

The window of Fanny's room opened out upon a balcony looking westward, and here they seated themselves, Florence on a low ottoman, with her head resting in her aunt's lap, while the latter softly stroked her hair.

The sun went down; the attendant clouds, which had made his death a pageant of glory, floated softly away, or laid aside their gorgeous robes; the crimson glow of the sky melted into amber, and this into deep, unfathomable blue, from whose depths the evening star shone tremulously. Still they sat there, saying little, thinking and feeling much.

"You have wrought a spell upon me, Aunt Fanny," said Florence, at length, "or this sunset has. You are responsible, however, for you

brought me here. The world looks very different to me, now, from what it did an hour ago."

"Ah! that is precisely what I was aiming at. I am glad my charm has worked so well."

"But it seems sad yet, — sadder than it ever did before to-day; mournful as the wind now rising and sighing through that elm-tree."

"Dear girl, you must not grieve so over what you cannot help, and what will all come right, in the end, I hope. Cast your care on Him who careth for us. It was from you I learned that lesson. It is a sweet and precious one; do not forget it yourself, now, in your hour of need."

"You have learned it, then? You believe in Jesus of Nazareth?" The tone was one of joyful surprise, and the answer came firm and clear, yet softly spoken, —

"I do."

"Oh, if Charley could only say that!"

"He will say it, some day! Have faith, have patience."

"Do you know, uncle has been trying to

make me think I must give up my religious convictions, in order to have any influence with Charley."

"Don't you believe it, Florence!" said her aunt, with emphasis. "The influence of religion is all that can reclaim him. Hold fast to it! Live it out before him! Win him back to the 'old faith he learned beside his mother's knee.'"

"But will he be won, Aunt Fanny? Rather, is not this faith so distasteful to him, that he will become estranged from me, if I cling to it?"

"And suppose he should, what then?"

"Oh, I could never bear that!" she said.

"He that loveth father or mother——"

"More than me, is not worthy of me." Florence finished the quotation in a firm, clear voice. "No, I will not be a coward. But Uncle Percy puts it this way:—if I lose my influence over him, I have no power to restrain him from open immorality." It was hard to use this word in connection with her brother, and the tears came again.

"You will be far more likely to lose your influence, if you surrender your convictions to his whims," said Aunt Fanny, decidedly.

"Do you think so?"

"I know it!"

"I felt it must be so; but uncle's talk upset me."

"What possessed Percy to torture you so, I wonder?"

"I do not think he meant to be unkind, but he did hurt me, cruelly." A pause, and then a sigh, — "I wish I knew how Charley is to-night, in body and in soul."

"Don't allow yourself to feel so anxious, dear. Let's light the lamp and read awhile, then commit him to our Father's care and go to rest. Listen to this little poem of Miss Muloch's."

And she read, while the evening wind swayed the trees, and breathed through the lattice, — mournful no more, but soft, and sweet, and refreshing, — those beautiful lines: —

"Plant it safe, thou little child;
Then cease watching and cease weeping.
Thou hast done thine utmost part,
Leave it with a quiet heart,
It will grow while thou art sleeping.

"If God need a stately tree
For the shelter of the nations,
He will make it grow; if not,
Never yet his love forgot
Human love, or faith, or patience.

"Plant it; consecrate with prayer:
Then cease watching and cease weeping.
Years hence, men its shade may crave
When its mighty branches wave
Beautiful, above thy sleeping.

"If that child his tree, tear-sown,
Ever saw, to ease his weeping,
I know not; but, unawares,
Oft this thought steals through my prayers,
It will grow while thou art sleeping."

Florence was soothed and strengthened by the hopeful words, and still more by the "strong consolation" they found in the Holy Book, and by the prayers they offered, as they knelt together.

This was the last quiet talk in the dear old home. A few evenings later, Fanny was floating, as in a dream, up the moonlit Hudson, entranced with the wild beauty of the Catskills and Adirondacks; Mr. West, with his darling asleep upon his bosom, was feeling the swell of the waves, and the keen ocean breezes, and saying softly to himself, "My native land, good-bye;" while Florence, in her state-room, was sending eager thoughts and questionings far over the waters, and earnest prayers upward to Him who heareth always.

But the same moon and stars shone upon them all, and the same kind Father's hand was over them, — the praying and the prayed-for — whether they thought of it or no.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM."

IT is not our purpose to follow the wanderers in their journeyings by sea and land. Enough to say of Florence, that her earnest prayers were answered, her faithful toil rewarded. She was permitted, not only to nurse her brother back to life, and cheer the long, tedious hours of his convalescence, but, at length,

"—— by many a word
Linked unto moments when the heart was stirred;
By the persuasion of her fervent eyes,
All eloquent with childlike piety;
By the still beauty of her life,"

she led him back from the paths in which he had wandered, and witnessed, with joy and thankfulness unspeakable, the renewal of his early vows to God. And he kept them well. The thought of his worse than wasted years made him doubly diligent, that he might "redeem the time" as far as in him lay. So entire was the change, that Mr. West was compelled to acknowledge that, whether this religion was worth much or little in other cases, it had surely proved the crown of manhood to Charles Alton.

Henry Burton left the city immediately after the disgraceful quarrel, in which he appeared to have been the aggressor, but was pursued and arrested and brought to justice, Mr. West adding to the charges against him, that of embezzling his uncle's property, which was, after a tedious process of law, restored to its rightful owners.

Mr. West spent some time in France and Germany, revelling among the delights of nature, and collecting rare treasures of art, till, satiated with these, he turned his steps toward that sub-

limest vision which had been beckoning to him all the while, — the Alps. He stood with uncovered brow before those awful peaks, he heard the voice of the cataract and the avalanche, but drew no nearer Him, who "by His strength settleth fast the mountains, being girded with power." To Florence, who accompanied him, it was as if she had entered the Holy of Holies, and beheld, with unveiled face, the glory of the Lord. Never, to her dying day, will she speak of that brief sojourn among the Alps, save with hushed voice and softened manner, as one who has looked on things unutterable.

Florence returned to her brother, and Mr. West whiled away a few more months in Rome, and Venice, and Naples,— striving in vain to forget his own present in this "land of all men's past;" — and then prepared to seek his native land again. Charles and Florence returned with him, the former having decided to transfer his business to New York, and there they made their home together. We will lift the curtain

upon a scene or two in this new home, and then close our simple story.

One day, Mr. West was opening and arranging some choice paintings he had selected in Europe, little Allie, meantime, flitting round among them, eliciting many a "take care," and "don't touch," and "run away from there, darling," which she little heeded or very soon forgot. At length, a copy of Raphael's "Holy Family" arrested her attention, and sitting flat on the floor before it, she looked intently for a while, then suddenly asked, —

"Papa, what little baby is that? And what makes it so bright round his head?"

"They call him Jesus, I believe," said her father, indifferently.

"But tell me all about him, papa. A'n't he lovely?"

"Go ask Cousin Florrie about it, pet. Papa's busy," he said evasively, willing to avoid the responsibility of shaping the child's first impressions on that theme.

Florence, sitting in the next room, heard the conversation, and, remembering Aunt Mary's words, "You will teach her the way, Florence. Bring her home to me, my daughter," she looked up for help to keep the sacred charge, as the child came running to her with her eager questions. Taking the little one in her arms, she rehearsed the old, yet ever new story, the tale so oft repeated, yet losing, through all the centuries, not one iota of its pathos and power. From the cradle to the cross, and thence to the ascension from Mount Olivet, she laid before the child's wondering gaze the whole outline of that divine and glorious, yet sweetly-human life, that wondrous pledge and revelation of the life to come. The child listened with unfailing interest, and, more than once, there were tears in the sweet blue eyes. When the recital closed, she said, —

"Oh, wasn't he dood! Don't oo love him, Florrie?"

"Indeed I do, darling," she said, pressing the

little form in a closer embrace. "And, do you know, He is going to take all of us that love Him up to that beautiful home of His, and let us live with Him always."

A new idea flashed across the baby mind, and half-rising from Florence's arms, she looked in her face, with the earnest question, —

"A'n't that where mamma's gone, Florrie?"

She had not forgotten the dear, lost mother, and often in their wanderings, she had asked her father if they should not find her here or there, not knowing that the question hurt him like a knife-thrust, every time.

"Indeed it is, you sweet, little precious, — didn't you know that was where she went?"

Her own tears were falling now, but she soon checked them, and continued, —

"She's up there, among the beautiful trees and flowers, the music and bright sunshine, waiting for papa and Allie and all the rest of us. Some day, if we're good, we'll all go to see her, and then we'll never leave her any more."

"Oh, I so glad, — so glad," she murmured, and nestled close in the enfolding arms again, with restful confidence and peace.

Not long after, she was looking at the picture again, as she sat in her father's lap, at bed-time.

"Papa, wasn't Jesus lovely?" she said, in musing, dreamy accents, half to herself, and half to him.

"I suppose so."

His indifference roused her, and she insisted earnestly, —

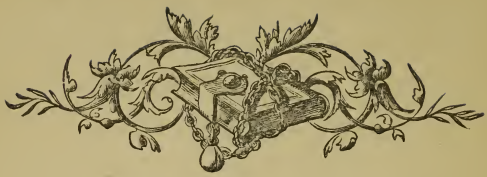
"But he was *so dood*, papa, *ever so dood*, better'n you, or Florrie, or anybody."

No answer.

"Say, papa, he took mamma up there, didn't he?" pointing to the evening star which shone through the window, as if that were the gateway. "We'll all go see him some time, Florrie says."

He folded her close in his arms, and bent over her tenderly, kissing and hushing her to sleep. When he raised his head, Florence, sitting by, saw what she had never seen before, — his eyes were full of tears.

"And a little child shall shall lead them," was her thought. "Who knows but this proud intellect, this strong, determined soul, that has resisted argument and persuasion and entreaty, that has stood unmoved alike by the mercies and judgments of God, may yet be led by these infant hands, to the feet of Him who said, 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven.'"



CHAPTER XIX.

A FAREWELL LOOK.

YEARS have come and gone, and changes have passed over the little circle with which we have become so pleasantly familiar; but the years have touched them lightly, and the changes have, in the main, been pleasant ones. And now, on a Thanksgiving evening, behold the circle gathered again, unbroken, in Mr. West's pleasant parlor. Unbroken, — ay, and enlarged, for Florence comes with her husband and a little child, and Charles has a beautiful young creature by his side, whom he calls

by the sacred name of wife. The faces we knew before, have changed a little. Mr. West's dark hair has gained a few threads of silver, Alice is taller, but slender and graceful still, with the mysterious light of dawning womanhood just softening the girlish laughter of her eyes. Fanny is with them again, — Fanny West still in name, as well as in the sprightly raciness of character which made her so companionable, while, over her changeful countenance, there shines a steady light, which betokens the settled peace within. Mr. Richards, the dear pastor from Mayville, is here, too, a guest whom all delight to honor.

The festivities of the day are over, and the quiet hour "between the dark and the daylight," finds the little group gathered in the parlor, talking in subdued tones, and with many a pause which each one fills with dreams and fancies of his own. Will they forgive us if we steal into some shadowy nook in the quiet room, to watch their faces in the flickering firelight, and listen to what they say?

"A penny for your thoughts," said Florence, by way of breaking one of those pauses, during which her husband seemed regarding her or the child she held, or both, very intently.

"I'll tell you for half the price," laughed Charles, "and tell you correctly, too, or refund the money." Florence put her hand in her pocket, and Charles went on. "He was tracing the likeness between you and that Madonna in the picture just above you. The firelight may be deceptive, but I believe there *is* a little resemblance, even to eyes less lover-like than his."

"Nonsense, Charles!" retorted he. "Your courtship is so lately ended, you see every thing with lover's eyes."

"No evasion, sir! you can't deny I've earned my half-penny."

Mr. West looked up. "As to that picture, it's a sacred thing to me. Do you know its associations, Florence?" She looked inquiringly. "Have you forgotten Allie's questions about it, when it was first put up, and how you answered

them, and how she prattled to me about it afterwards."

Florence slowly recalled the faded memory, and Allie said, "I remember well when Florence first told me the story of Jesus' life, but I had forgotten what led to it. I think I began to love the Savior from that hour."

"Had this incident anything to do with the change in your views, Uncle?" asked Florence, with interest.

"It was the turning point," said Mr. West. "You did not know I was listening when you told the 'old, old story,' but I think some angel helped you tell it, for it seemed to me I had never heard it before. And then the simple confidence and love with which the child received it were so beautiful, and her artless prattle about it so touching. There had always been in my mind an aversion to Christianity, but then and there I saw it in a new light, and really wished, for the first time in my life, that I could believe it. It was surprising, when my feelings were once en-

listed, how easily I found time for that investigation of the claims of Christianity to which I had been often urged. Well, it was not long before my understanding became pretty well convinced, but somehow, the old habit of unbelief remained, and I vacillated between my doubts and my convictions for a long time. At last, — but you all know the result; and I — I thank God for it every day."

"And so do we all, my brother," said Mr. Richards. "I think I never thanked Him quite as fervently in my life, as on that evening you first told me you could say to Jesus of Nazareth, 'My Lord and my God.'"

"Another thing for which I can never be thankful enough," said Mr. West, "is that those nearest me were saved from the influence of my unbelieving years- God has been merciful to all of mine as well as to me. My Mary" — he could speak of her now — "and three dear, little ones await me on the other shore; Allie is going with me, or leading me, rather, and as for my assaults on Florence's faith —"

"If assaults they could be called," she broke in, "they have been overruled, I think, for my good. Certain it is, that my faith, though sometimes sorely tried, perhaps a little shaken, settled down at last on firmer, broader foundations, and with a far more solid structure than before."

"Do you mean to say you would not exchange your present condition for the early faith, that had never dreamed of doubt as possible?" said Fanny.

"I certainly do," was Florence's clear, decided answer. "It is true, that 'with the heart man believeth unto righteousness,' and I believed with my heart long ago; but now I believe with heart, and intellect, and soul and all that is within me! The beauty and preciousness of this faith were never so apparent as since I have compared it with the cold, unsatisfying theories of those who reject it; while the reasons for believing seem stronger by contrast with the weakness of the objections raised. The more I test it by the light of reason and experience, of observation and re-

flection, the more I love it, the more I glory in it!"

"Still, the influence of skepticism is subtle and dangerous to most minds," said her husband. "It unsettles former beliefs, and does not, can not, give anything satisfactory in their place."

"I know, — poor Anna, for instance," said Florence, musingly. "I don't suppose she would thank me for my pity, — she seems happy enough since wealth has enabled her to gratify her love of luxury and display. But to me, it is the saddest thing in the world to see a mind drift, as hers has done, from faith to doubt, and thence to indifference, sure of nothing, and caring for nothing but the pleasures of the present moment."

"Do you see much of her, lately?" asked Mr. Richards.

"Not much; I used to meet her in society, occasionally, when I first came home from Europe, and just after she and her mother had removed to the city. She was always the gayest of the gay; but she and I had not much in common, and

we soon drifted apart. I regret, beyond measure, to see her so frivolous. I am disappointed, too, for I used to think that the really noble elements in her character would, in time, gain the ascendancy.

"'Investigation' seemed to result rather disastrously, in her case," said Charles.

"It was not investigation, but the want of it!" said Florence, quickly. "She was fascinated by specious theories and ingenious speculations, and yielded to impressions, without testing their accuracy."

"But, knowing this will be the result with some minds, you would not encourage any one to court these influences, would you?"

"Oh, no. Never put yourself in the way of danger and temptation, needlessly; but if it come, face it boldly, and overcome it, not run away from it. In this age of free thought and discussion, we shall meet error fast enough without seeking for it, — if we would avoid it, we must needs go out of the world."

"Would you allow children, of whose minds you had the moulding, to read or listen to arguments against Christianity?"

"I do not think I should forbid it; I probably could not entirely prevent it, if I tried. I should take care to counteract error by appropriate truth, to form in their minds intelligent, well-grounded convictions, which could not easily be shaken, rather than to shield them entirely from influences which they must meet sooner or later."

"Something like the measles and whooping-cough, isn't it?" said Mr. Richards, playfully. "You would not take the responsibility of exposing children to the disease; still, you feel half glad to have them take it while young and under your care, so you can nurse them through it, knowing it may go harder with them by and by."

Florence looked up, to see whether he said this in good faith, or whether he was making light of her theory; but the first glance re-assured her, and she laughingly thanked him for the illustration.

Alice, who had been listening thoughtfully, now asked, "Shall I ever read any of those naughty books of yours, papa?"

"I don't think you will find many of them in my library, now," he answered. "If you ever do read anything of the kind, let me read with you, and point out the error and expose the sophistry, if you do not see it yourself."

"Yes, papa; but I am very well content with blissful ignorance of these subtleties. The oak-tree may wrestle with storms and overcome them, as you and Cousin Florence do; but the little violet at its foot can only nestle in the protecting shade, and look up to drink the sunshine flickering through the leaves."

"My dear little humility," he said, with a glance that had a caress in it. "Well, be my violet, then. It is the sweetest flower in the world."

"Miss Alice has given us the whole thing in a nut-shell," said the minister. "Different plants require different conditions of soil and atmos-

phere, and God places each in the situation best adapted to its full developement. Let each be content with His allotment, and make the most of whatever influences surround it, whether rain or sunshine, storm or calm."

—— THE END. ——

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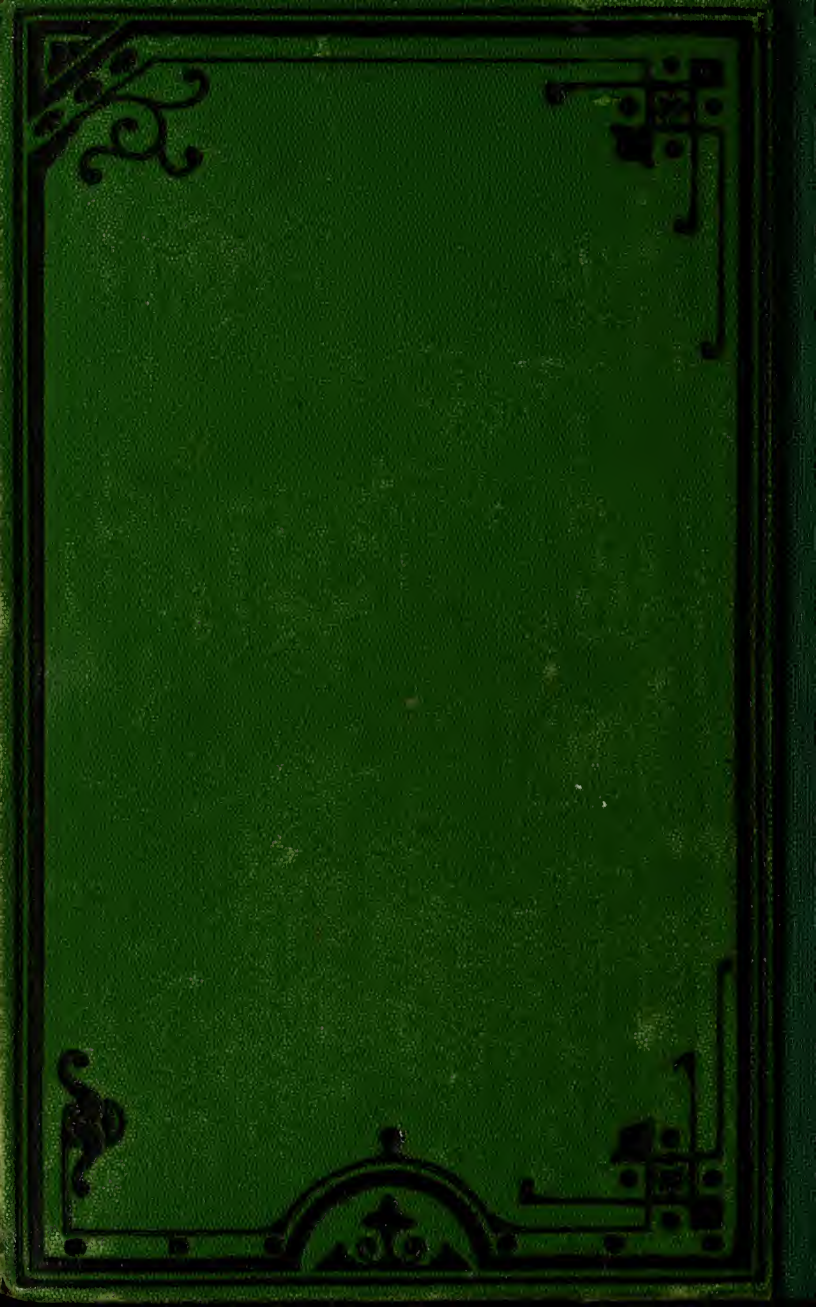
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